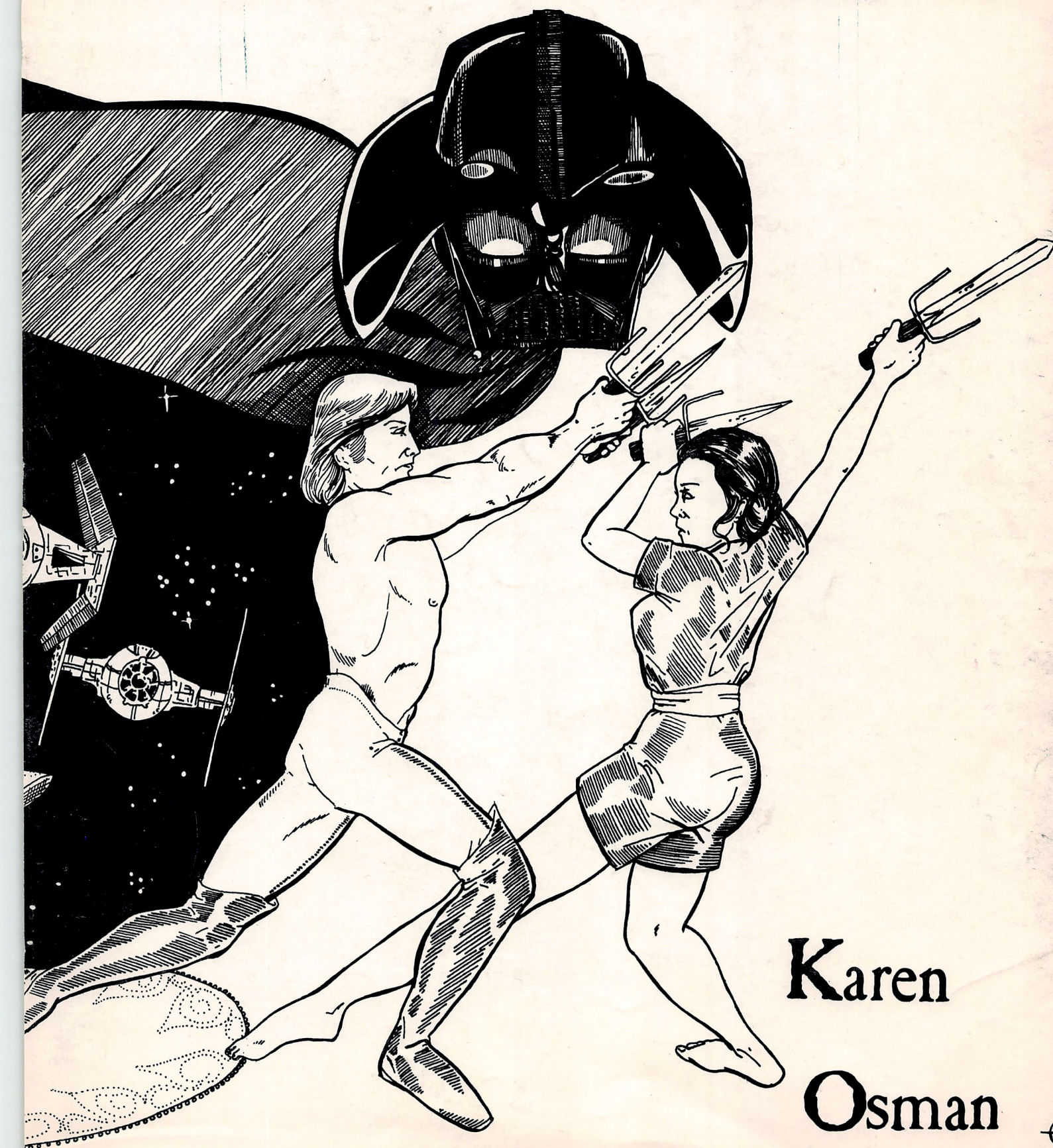


KNIGHT of SHADOWS



Karen
Osman

KNIGHT of SHADOWS



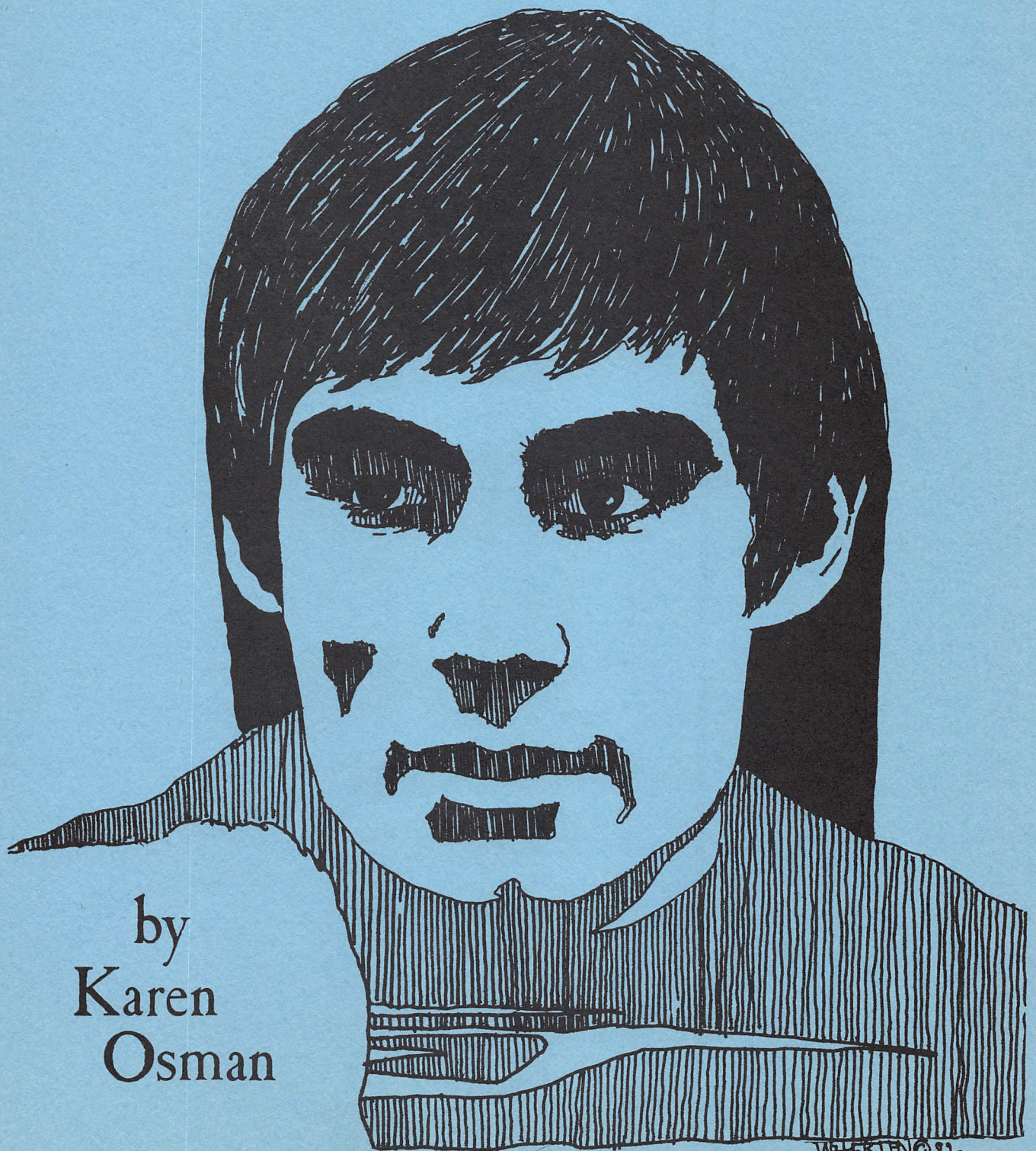
Karen Osman

"Obi-Wan Kenobi sat for a moment enjoying the damp, alive smell of the air from the garden outside. The danger seemed absurd, a paranoid fantasy, in this peaceful moment. Ridiculous--Darth was no Imperial! He was just confused. Darth had been his since he was six years old, when the conditioning had been imprinted on him. That was too deeply imbedded by now for anyone but a Jedi master to detect. No, the conditioning was safe--and Darth was safe. It must be a false alarm. Doubtless it would all look very silly in the morning. . . . "

A novel of the young
Darth Vader, the Jedi,
and betrayal . . .

Cover by Eluki bes Shahr

Knight of Shadows



by
Karen
Osman

Knight of Shadows

by Karen Osman

Illustrations by Carol Waterman

Edited by Devra Michele Langsam



Masiform D Special Supplementary Issue #3

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Dedication

This story is dedicated, with all my thanks, to
Susan Matthews, Pam Kowalski, and Barbara Tennison,
who gave me Ideas;
Barbara Wenk, Joyce Yasner, and Devra Langsam,
who gave me Moral Support;
And most of all, with my everlasting gratitude, to
Anne Elizabeth Zeek,
who gave me Fandom, too.



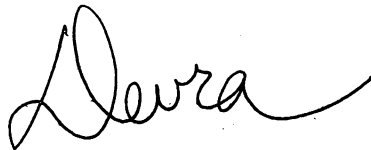
EDITORIAL CLAPTRAP

I was planning to write an elegant, long editorial, full of sly little jokes about *STAR TREK* and *STAR WARS*, to show that I hadn't deserted the one from a new affection for the other. I was going to go on about how I did the editing for this story, even if Karen does refer to Anne as 'her editor' in the note. I was going to go on and on . . . but then, I wasn't planning to write this 'on the stick' at 10:30 Friday morning when it should have gone to press Monday previous . . .

* sigh *

Therefore, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to Joyce Yasner and Linda Deneroff, who gave up innumerable lunch hours to do the typing and proofreading on this, and to Regina Gottesman, whose assistance was very much appreciated.

I did the presstyping on the final poem, so don't blame Bernie for it. And everything on this page is mine--no one proofed it or anything. Any errors are all mine, too.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Devra". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'D' and a long, sweeping tail.

Author's Note

Long ago in a galaxy far, far away . . . (actually, about two years ago in New York at Mos' Eastly Con) . . . my editor, Anne Elizabeth Zeek, was going over my second Raan story. "Boy, Karen," she said in her typically diplomatic editorial fashion, "your rebel characters really stink. Totally unbelievable."

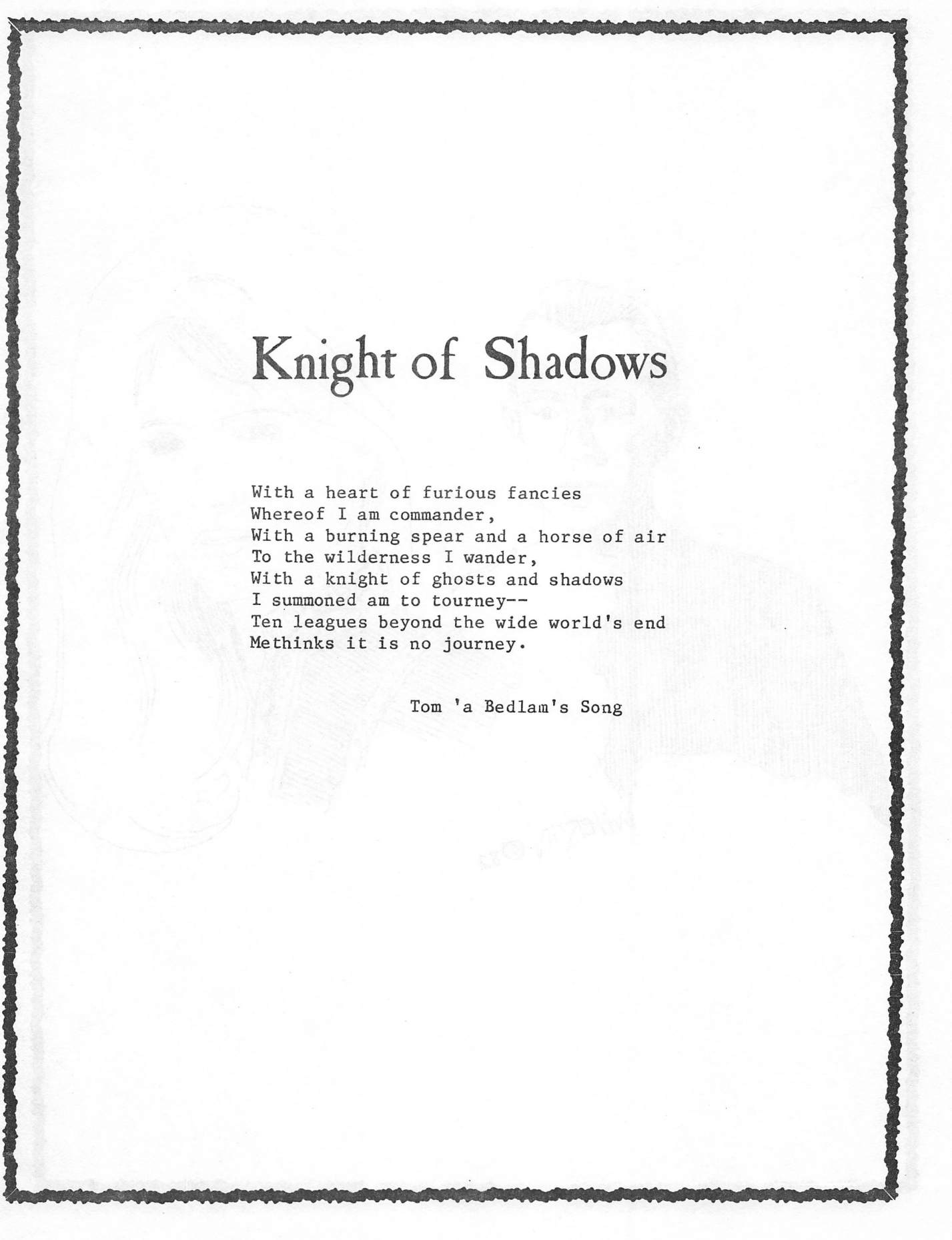
"True, Anne," I said, shuffling my feet and looking guilty. "You're absolutely right; I can't do rebels at all."

Well," she said, "what are you going to do about it?"

"I know," I said brightly, "I'll write a story just for you, with no rebels in it at all!"

And so here it is, Anne Elizabeth Zeek; just
for you--a story with no rebels in it at all . . .





Knight of Shadows

With a heart of furious fancies
Whereof I am commander,
With a burning spear and a horse of air
To the wilderness I wander,
With a knight of ghosts and shadows
I summoned am to tourney--
Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end
Methinks it is no journey.

Tom 'a Bedlam's Song



Prologue

"Your husband was near death when I left him, your Highness," the bearded man was saying. "There is no way he could have survived."

"Thank you, General Kenobi. It was kind of you to come all the way to Sith to tell me yourself. You could have sent a message."

The young woman was remarkably composed for someone who had just learned of the death of her husband and the father of her son. It was not aristocratic control; he could read her aura in the Force and there was no overwhelming grief there. So I was right, Kenobi thought; she didn't love him. That should make this much easier. I wonder how she feels about the child?

Darth is dead. Princess Jessha tried to dredge up some sort of emotion appropriate to the loss of a husband. Nothing came. Even the dislike she had felt for so long was stale and meaningless, mellowed into apathy. She hadn't seen him since shortly after the child's birth--almost two years now. So much had happened since he had fled from Sith, had gone away to join the Jedi. Her shoulders twitched slightly, involuntarily, in spite of her control. That's an ugly way to die: burned. Did he really deserve that? There was a time she would have thought even that almost too good for him. I would have set the fire myself. She smiled the tiniest bit, ruefully. But I was very young then, when it all started. We both were . . .

The Sith

It was the year of Imperial grace one hundred and four, eighty-third since the death of the Emperor Palpatine of glorious memory, twelfth of the current reign, and the Empire lay licking its wounds from the Clone Wars. The victory had been costly; she needed time to recover and digest her conquests. The small client systems surviving in precarious independence on the fringes of the Empire breathed sighs of relief and looked to their defenses and their diplomacies to stave off the inevitable a little longer.

Among them was Sith.

Politics was of only peripheral interest that afternoon in the gardens of the Grand Duke's summer residence at Falthei. There was a bit of fall crispness in the air. The Household would soon be moving to the grey stone winter palace with its yard-thick walls and huge fireplaces designed to ward off the blizzards of the Sith cold season. But for now, the sun was still warm in this sheltered corner where mother and daughter sat at their sewing. The veil of late-blooming vineflowers that covered the wall behind them gave off the heavy, sleepy scent of autumn and the soft buzzing of honeygatherers hurrying to store the last of their nectar crop against the winter.

The ten-year-old Princess Jessha sat on the carved stone bench with her head bent over her embroidery sampler. Long falls of pale blonde hair shadowed her face and brushed the outsides of her forearms. Her expression, as befitted a princess of Sith, was demure. Her feet were neatly tucked together beneath her bulky skirts, her back straight, but her heart was mutinous. The Princess Jessha hated embroidery. She pushed the heels of her slippers together so hard the rough brocade ground into her small feet and her knees quivered slightly in an invisible gesture of frustration. Control. A Lady of Sith must never allow unseemly evidence of her emotions to show, not even-- Jessha thought rebelliously of her brothers, who had escaped the iron hand of their mother on their seventh birthdays for the

tutelage of the family arms-master and their more indulgent lord father, the Grand Duke. They could run and shout and sprawl. But for the girls of the family, there was no escape. Jessha felt suffocated, and she got a certain satisfaction from pushing her stitches through the linen in savage little stabs that were, she hoped, hidden from her mother's constant scrutiny by her curtain of hair.

She risked a sideways look under her hair. The Duchess Norella turned a length of gold wire around the outline of the branching tines of the welett's antler she was stitching and couched it down neatly with red silk. Her round, pink face and plump figure, her carefully cultivated expression of mild unworldliness, made her look rather like a merchant's wife masquerading in the elaborate green-and-silver gown. But Jessha was all too aware of the terror the Duchess could inspire in her children and her household with no more than a frown and a gentle word of rebuke. Jessha was half afraid that if her mother ever raised her voice, the very stars would fall out of the sky, but so far it had never happened.

As she worked, the Duchess rehearsed, " . . . Koric, of course, will marry Maryen, and Daali is betrothed to Sanna of Wenk's daughter, and you--" She looked up and smiled at her daughter. "--And you are very lucky, Jessha. You are to wed your cousin Darth."

In spite of all she could do, Jessha fidgeted. Her mother frowned. "What is it?"

"I don't want to marry Darth. He's . . . he's . . . mean; he won't play with us and half the time he looks at you like you aren't even there, and when I told him the story about Daali falling off his delwa at the jump, he just stared at me. Everyone else thought it was funny. I don't like Darth. He's no fun at all."

"Darth is the Heir. He will be the next Dark Lord, and it is a great honor to be chosen for him. You should be proud." The Duchess continued, "He is to be your husband, not your playmate."

Jessha said, "Maybe I won't stay on Sith and get married at all. Maybe I'll go to school on Center, and see cities and the droids that talk, and . . . and I'll marry one of the Emperor's sons and have a big palace, bigger than the Dark Lord's, with holowindows and a real flitter that actually flies in the air, and--"

The Duchess's expression was a mixture of amusement and irritation. "There you go again, little skywalker, dancing among the clouds. Come back down to earth. You can't go to the Imperial worlds; your duty is here, on Sith. You will have to accept it."

"But I don't want to!"

Jessha almost thought, for a moment, that she saw a distant wistfulness in her mother's face, but the look flickered and was gone before she could be sure. "Child, you must learn that what you want has nothing to do with your duty as princess of Sith. We'll hear no more about it."

"Yes, Momma."

Duchess Norella stitched down more gold wire. "Don't worry, child. You will learn to like your cousin well enough once you marry. I never even saw the Duke your father before our wedding day, and we have been perfectly contented all these year. You are of the royal House and your blood is precious. You must wed where the Council dictates, for the good of Sith."

"Yes, Momma," Jessha repeated in a lifeless voice.

The Duchess raised questioning eyebrows at her daughter, and Jessha took advantage of the softening to try to explain. She said hurriedly, "Momma, I don't want to live in the Palace. I'm afraid of the Dark Lord."

Very wise. Jessha caught the undercurrent of her mother's thoughts, unsure if the Duchess were deliberately unshielded or had simply forgotten her daughter's new ability to pick up in the Force. But no, the Duchess never forgot anything. If you fear this one enough, you may survive to be the wife of the next Dark Lord. "He will be a good lord to you," she said aloud, her tone curiously flat. Jessha concluded from the set of her mother's mouth that there would be no further discussion on that subject. She lowered her eyes submissively and was silent. "Let me see how your burden stitch looks now, Jessha."

"Yes, Momma." No, Jessha thought. No, no, NO! I want to say it so much, just once, about anything. It would feel so good to say what I actually think, what I actually want--just stand up and shout "NO!" right out loud--

"Jessha," the Duchess said sharply.

The girl jumped, pricked herself with her needle, and automatically stuck the gashed finger in her mouth. She kept forgetting that her own thoughts were no longer private since her Force-sense had begun to mature. Her mother reached over, removed the offending finger, and set Jessha's hand in her lap.

"Control yourself," she said, then added more gently, "you are getting to be a young lady. Other people beside your family will soon be able to Read you, and you must not let them hear you thinking like that. You wouldn't want them to, would you?"

"No, Momma," said Jessha through clenched teeth as she raised her wobbly new Force-shield.

The Duchess Norella sighed, very softly.



When she remembered it later, it seemed to Jessha that it was snowing that whole cold season before Koric went off to the university; that she spent that entire winter sitting on the window seat in the solar, watching the snow fall and envying her brother.

The snow had finally stopped that afternoon after tapering off to a few spits, leaving behind a sullen overcast that threatened to renew the attack at any time. Jessha curled up more tightly on the window seat, hugging her ankles, and looked out into the garden, now reduced to a variety of mysterious white shapes and a cold-looking, naked marble tree-spirit waiting for the spring thaw to become a fountain again. She stretched luxuriously and turned to insert another story into her imported holoviewer. It was so warm and snug here in the solar--no, she reminded herself, the proper word, the word the Imperials used, was "dayroom". Yes, the dayroom was wonderful on a winter morning like this, with her family sitting around the fire together, just like the families in the holotapes her father ordered for her from the Imperial worlds where everything was new and modern and exciting.

She rested her elbow on the windowsill, put her head on her hand, and daydreamed. If only she could go to visit those magical far-off worlds where eleven-year-old girls like her lived in "apartments" in "cities" instead of in old castles, and traveled in groundcars on busy roads instead of on delwa-back. To go to a "school" instead of having lessons with a tutor and a dancing-master--Jessha sighed. Koric would get to see it all. He would be going off-planet to study at the university. She would stay here; it was not proper for a princess of Sith to attend a public university, no matter how liberal and progressive her parents were. Jessha sighed again. Being a princess of Sith could be very dull sometimes.

Her name in a fragment of conversation caught her attention.

"It's not that I mind being born second," the Grand Duke was saying. "It's just that I object to old Walde being born first. He's insufferable, and that obnoxious brat of his, Darth, takes right after him." Jessha's father took another swallow of wine and stared moodily into the fire. The Grand Duke hated being cooped up inside, inactive. The snow put him in a foul humor. It wasn't that he didn't want to be with his family, Jessha knew. In fact, he loved his family very much. But he missed his hunting more.

"Arlen," said his wife warningly into her embroidery. She raised her head, crowned by the elaborate coronet of blonde braids that looked so out of place above her plain face, and smiled at the casual and vaguely disheveled figure of her husband. "That obnoxious brat is the Heir and the boy Jessha is going to marry."

"It's such a close match--first cousins. I hope the Genetic Council knows what it's doing."

"They told me that Darth has some remarkably strong Force recessives that match Jessha's and the Council wants to see if they can be fixed in the royal line. It seems reasonable to me." She paused, snipped the silk, and rethreaded her needle with another color. "I just hope the two of them can live together."

"Yes. I know. Last Midwinter Feast I invited him to join in the blindman's bluff with the family, and he said, 'No, I thank you Uncle; I do not play,' and looked down his nose at me as if I were one of the servants. I wouldn't have thought anybody could look down his nose at me when he only came up to my belt buckle."

"Poor Darth," Duchess Norella sighed. "I think Walde expects too much of him. He's only a little boy."

"He's not like any other little boy I ever saw--not like our children. I'll bet Walde fooled us all, and he's actually a thirty-year-old midget in disguise. It wouldn't surprise me. I never did think that old stick was capable of--"

"Arlen! The children!"

Jessha shrank back into the window seat and tried to look as if she hadn't been listening. She surveyed the dayroom. Her two younger brothers were building a fort out of blocks, her two younger sisters playing quietly in the corner. Her next older brother was plaiting ribbons into a dress bridle for his favorite riding delwa, also trying to look very absorbed in what he was doing. They did make quite a crowd, she thought. Whatever happened to his nephew, Duke Arlen had certainly done his duty to assure the succession of Sith.

"Whatever we think about it," the Duchess continued calmly, "Darth is going to marry Jessha. The Council is quite determined."

The Duke snorted. "That bunch of ivory-tower mystics! The way they've been selecting for Force ability the last few generations, you'd think they were breeding Jedi instead of Sith. I think we need a little more honest warrior spirit and a little less mumbo-jumbo. Maybe that's what's wrong with the boy." He grimaced. "It hasn't done wonders for Walde."

"Oh, Arlen," Norella laughed, "you're just tired of being indoors. Cheer up; it looks as though the snow has stopped at last. Maybe you can go hunting tomorrow after all."

The Duke jumped up and went to the window, looking out over his daughter's head. He turned back to his wife with a cheerful grin. "Right you are--it has stopped." He continued airily, "Oh, well; we're all slaves to the Council, I suppose. Jessha will just have to take her chances like the rest of us. Why do you think I married you?"

"Because you're madly in love with me, of course," the Duchess replied complacently.

"Ah-hah! My secret discovered!" he said, with a look of mock-horror. He strode over to her chair and kissed her soundly.

There was the sound of rapid footsteps down the hallway outside, and a tall, blond young man burst into the room, followed by a blast of arctic air. He stamped his boots on the floor, sending a shower of snow cascading down off his fur-lined winter cloak, and beamed all over his frank, high-spirited face. He was followed at a respectful distance by a man wearing the uniform of an Alderaani Air Force lieutenant, who caught the door before it could slam, and shut it.

"Koric!" said the Duchess. "Is that any way to come in here? Look what you're doing to the floor!"

"It was glorious, just glorious!" Koric cried, oblivious to the state of the carpet. "We flew up above the storm, right over the mountains. The clouds looked like a pot of soup boiling. Lieutenant Pelz even let me hold the controls for a while. And then we came down through the storm--the lightning was all around us. Wonderful!"

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. And now, son--"

"Oh, father, I can't understand why we can't import enough of these Imperial machines for everyone--the common people, too. We could even build them ourselves, the lieutenant tells me. Think how convenient they would be: the farmers could get their crops to market in a fraction of the time; we could even travel in the winter. And it's so beautiful. Flying--"

"Your Grace," the Alderaani approached the Duke and bowed. "Sir, as I told your son, Sith is rich in metals and atomic ores. Alderaan could easily help your government set up a pilot plant to manufacture aircars using native materials and native labor. Why, within ten years--maybe even five--we could be turning out enough aircars to supply your whole planet. And that's not all, sir. There are hundreds of other items . . .

"No," said the Duke. "His Highness has forbidden it."

The children, who had been clustering around the Alderaani with excited chatter, fell silent and turned to their father. Koric looked rebellious and the Alderaani puzzled.

"But father, why? There's no reason--" Koric began.

"The Dark Lord has forbidden it. The question is closed."

Koric threw down his gloves with a colorful and improbable observation on his uncle's personal habits. The Alderaani stifled a snicker.

"You may go, pilot," said the Duke coldly, and for a moment he looked remarkably like his brother. The pilot bowed himself out hurriedly. Duke Arlen rose, clasped his hands behind his back and strode back and forth in front of the fire in an abstracted fashion. Duchess Norella watched him carefully, her hands quiet in her lap but holding, perhaps, more tightly to the needle and embroidery frame than usual. After a moment, Arlen spoke to her. "Send the rest of the children out."

"Call the nurses, Daali," the Duchess said, and the boy went to the door, opened it, and spoke to the guard on the outside. The children's nurses, who had been waiting in the outer room, came in to take their charges away to the Children's Solar in the other wing of the winter palace. Jessha hesitated, afire with curiosity, near the door.

"If you don't mind, my dear," said Arlen.

"Arlen," the Duchess said, "I don't think . . . " She swallowed her objection at her husband's irritated gesture, gathered her needlework and moved slowly toward the door. Her waiting woman hurried to her side through the open door and the Duchess put the embroidery into her hands almost

mechanically. Norella paused reluctantly at the door, but her husband's expression was determined. After a nearly imperceptible hesitation, almost pleading, was met by the same adamant look, she hurried Jessha out in front of her and nodded to the guard to close the thick wooden doors behind them.

When they were alone, Duke Arlen turned back to his son. "You will not use that kind of language in front of your lady mother."

"I'm sorry, father. But it makes me so angry--"

The Duke returned to his chair and refilled his glass before continuing. "That remark was singularly stupid. In case it escaped your notice, it was also treason. If it were to come to his attention, your uncle has a number of highly skilled people who would be happy to remind you of that fact at the cost of considerable personal discomfort to you."

Koric looked a bit green, but he said boldly, "The Prince wouldn't do that. I'm of his own blood."

"That wouldn't stop Walde if he thought you were a threat to him." The Duke paused. "Koric, I think it's time you and I had a little talk. You must start to think about it sometime."

The Duke settled back in his chair and motioned Koric to the seat beside him. "Koric, the old Prince is not likely to live for too many more years; you know his health is not the best. You are next in line for the throne of Sith after your cousin, and Darth is only a ten-year-old boy. There are a number of lords who would much rather see my son as Lord of the Sith than Walde's--men who favor closer ties with the Empire, a more rapid policy of modernization. Men who fear the power of the Empire and do not want a child on the throne to oppose it. Do you understand what all that means?"

"I know all that, father. It's been that way for years. What makes it so important now?"

"Walde is not the man to move rashly or unnecessarily. But you will be of legal age this coming spring. Do you think I'm sending you to the Hub for schooling simply because you can get a better education on an Imperial planet?"

"I suppose not."

"You suppose rightly. I want to remove the temptation for your loving uncle to ensure his whelp's undisputed claim by having you removed quietly and permanently."

Koric sat for a moment, digesting this. Then he looked up, obviously disturbed. "But father, what about you? Are you in danger, too?"

"Me? If I were, I'd have disappeared years ago. No, I stay quietly at home: I enjoy my family, I drink, I go hunting, I attend to my own estates. I have no ambition for the throne, and Walde knows it."

"I don't want the throne either," said Koric hurriedly.

His father looked at him dubiously. "Don't you? Well, if you don't, you'd better let those supporters you've been collecting know about it, or you may find yourself in an embarrassing position fairly soon. Not to mention a dangerous one. No one has ever accused Walde of being overly naive."

"Or you, father."

Arlen sighed. "Son, I admire your spirit, but I sometimes wonder about your common sense. Have a little patience. Walde won't live forever." He leaned forward, suddenly completely serious. "And Koric--don't expect me to back you. Do you think you are the first to try this sort of thing? Not this reign, not this century--and Walde has a long memory. You are my son, but Walde is my elder brother. Whatever I think of him, he's the legitimate Dark Lord, and his son's the legitimate Heir. That's the way it's got to be."

Koric's face showed clearly what was in his mind.

"You think I'm a coward, eh?" Arlen's wry humor returned. "You're not the first there, either, son. Thank the Bright Lord, Walde is sure of it. Took me long enough to convince him, too."

Koric shifted nervously in his seat and Arlen watched him until what he was trying to say bubbled up irrepressibly to the surface. "Father, don't you care?"

"About what?"

"About our people. I go by the fields out there--our fields--and there they are, working with draft delwas and hand plows and scythes. Things they haven't used in the Empire for two hundred years. They can hardly plant enough to feed themselves, let alone harvest any to sell and buy the things they need from the towns. And we have a flitter, and spiced wine--" Koric waved at the table. "If we could bring in Imperial technology it would improve things so much. They'd work harder for us, too, I'm sure of it. Doesn't it matter to you? Why won't the Dark Lord let us bring in Imperial machines? Why do you support him?"

"Ah, the idealism of youth," Arlen snorted. "Ask your Alderaani friend sometime how many of his factory workers have spiced wine and no worries about where their next meal is coming from." He leaned back. "Yes, certainly we need Imperial technology. But we must move slowly. Rapid changes confuse the peasants, and confused peasants are ill-tempered. I have no intention of putting my head--or yours--on the block in some uprising. Give it time, son. There's nothing harder to keep out than knowledge. Imperial technology will get here soon enough."

"It would get here a lot faster if you would do something to oppose the Dark Lord's policies!" Koric was angry now. "You're his brother. It would influence a lot of people if you spoke out for a more liberal policy, wouldn't it?"

"And influence me right into one of Walde's detention cells. Native Sith technology is quite good enough in that area."

"Father--"

"Enough, Koric. You'll be the lord here when I'm gone, and you have to understand the situation, but I'm not dead yet, and I don't intend to go before my time. I'm walking a tightrope and it's hard enough to stay balanced with your supporters pushing me from one side and Walde waiting for me to make a false move on the other. The only safe place is in the middle. I have to think of your mother and the children--and the safety of our people. The people you're so concerned about. Walde wouldn't stick at mass executions if he thought it would be an effective deterrent. He's done it before. For the sake of those poor peasants your heart bleeds for, go slowly and go quietly. And don't get me involved." Arlen gulped down his glass of wine and turned to refill it. He waved a dismissal in Koric's direction. "Now go away and leave me alone."



Spring came soon enough, and with it Koric's wedding. Jessha carried the bride's train and watched her brother, his bright gold hair like a candle flame above the cloth-of-gold of scarlet cotehardie with its bugling embroidered wellet and label of cadency; and she thought him the most wonderful man in the universe. Koric did his duty and departed soon after for Alderaan, leaving behind a pregnant wife, a discontented party of supporters, and several envious siblings. The next year was Daali's turn to bring home a wife; the Duke was heard to grumble that he wished one of his children would marry below his station--someone who would be quick, uncomplicated, and cheap to wed and bed. The Duchess simply smiled and, with her second son taken care of, moved on to begin the tedious shadow-work of silver thread and pearls that would eventually decorate Jessha's bridal veil.

Koric proved to be one of those unusual students who writes home from the university. At first, Arlen was pleased, and happy enough to share with the rest of the family Koric's excited descriptions of towering buildings, and droids, new foods, new clothes, new sights, new ideas. Koric reported that he was doing well enough in his studies and improving his grasp of Galactic quickly, although it soon became clear that he would never be a scholar. His family was satisfied.

Gradually, however, a disturbing note crept into Koric's letters and Arlen began to be uneasy. At first there was nothing the Duke could put his finger on: something Arlen identified as an injudicious and unnecessary enthusiasm in Koric's descriptions of his Alderaani history and political science courses; a casual sentence here and there with a faintly accusing tone. But there was little that was concrete. "No one goes barefoot here, even in the warmest weather," Koric wrote, and the Duke knew he was remembering the lowest class of peasants on their estates, who went barefoot in summer to save their shoes. Koric had frequently attended, as the Duke's Heir, the traditional ceremony of Midwinter Gift in the great hall, when the

Duchess handed out lengths of cloth, and leather, for making shoes to the poorest serfs.

"I do not think anyone goes hungry here. At least I have seen no beggars on the streets since I arrived." Arlen understood Koric's oblique reference to the swarms of petitioners who crowded around the ducal carriage and the Duke's riding delwa during his progresses. No beggars. No, thought Arlen, there the beggars live on the government dole, and have never seen their lords. I can well suppose proud Alderaan wants no beggars visible on her capital's streets for non-Alderaani to see. He snorted. No beggars--

"Even the poor folk here seem to have tri-D, and most of them have groundcars. My Alderaani acquaintance, Pera'u, says it was very different here before industrialization . . . "

Arlen sighed. This Pera'u continued to figure regularly in Koric's correspondence. Discreet inquiries through the Sith embassy uncovered very little about him. The young attache the Duke depended on for information which would not pass through his brother's official notice, the young attache who was nephew to the seneschal of the Duke's estates at Falthi, relayed only that this Pera'u was apparently an ordinary member of the Alderaani noble class, a younger son destined for the military, whose main interests in life seemed to be harmless political discussions of a mild liberal bent, pursuing the local women, and attending rather desultorily to his studies. What those studies were, the Duke's contact did not say. It sounded harmless enough, but Arlen was not satisfied. Not at all.

His suspicions were confirmed when he finally got the letter from his son he had been half-expecting and wholly fearing for some months. The year had turned twice since Koric had gone to Alderaan. It was snowing again, the Duke noticed--heavy, wet flakes that struck the leaded windows of Arlen's private study with aggressive thuds, as if the flakes were tiny battallions of enemy soldiers trying to take the castle by storm. The Duke smiled wryly at the martial image. If what this letter threatened came to pass, Castle Davalett, and all the castles of the Duke's family, might well find themselves under genuine attack. It will come, as I feared, Arlen thought. There is no way I can prevent it; no way I can escape it. I have never wished for my own death--I have always been far too much in love with the things of life and the harmless pleasures of the flesh. Or so my brother always thought. Perhaps he is right; perhaps if I too had cared more for political manipulation and the subtleties of rank and power, I could have prevented it. Perhaps if I had dominated my children, made them devious and cold-hearted--and obedient--as Walde has made his son, I could have prevented it. But I could not; it was not my nature, and it was no gift for a child of mine, to make him mean-spirited and calculating. Yet I have feared this more than anything, and now it has come. I have never wished for my own death--but I hope it comes before what I see here comes to trouble Sith. There will be deaths enough in it, and I do not want to be responsible.

No, a bitter self-accusing thought said in his mind; you have never wanted to be responsible for anything. . . .

Arlen waved the sodden messenger who had brought him his son's letter



out of the room and turned to the sheet again. At least Koric had had the sense to send it by hand, instead of through the regular communications service. But the Duke had little enough hope that the letter had escaped the Dark Lord's attention. There were too many steps between Alderaan and Castle Davalett, and Walde was too careful when it came to his nephew. Somewhere along the line, Walde was sure to have seen it.

The Duke noticed idly how the dull light through the falling snow turned the green velvet cushions of the window seat to a spiritless olive-drab and greyed the polished wood of his armchair to a depressing dark shade. He poured himself another glass of wine; even the beautiful deep red of his favorite brandiwjn was muddy in this light. How I hate snow, the Duke

thought drearily as he turned back to the letter. The child had no discretion.

He found the relevant paragraph. " . . . I have made many friends since I came here to Alderaan. We have had many discussions outside of class, and I have been pleased with the great interest they show in learning about the way things are in Sith, about our family, and about our people. They have been most kind and have listened to my ideas and my hopes for the future here and at home. I am afraid you might find them a little hasty, father; they are in a hurry to get things done. I know you have always said I was too impatient, but you know that when I am interested in something, I want to accomplish it right away. These friends of mine seem to be of the same opinion. I hope you will not be unhappy, but I intend to bring some of them home with me to visit when the time comes for me to leave Alderaan, and they have told me they are eager to see all the things I have told them about on Sith. I wished to let you know, so that you and my lady mother could plan to entertain them properly. I hope you will not object, for I have already invited them, and they are most interested in coming."

Arlen slammed down the letter. Did that idiot of a son of his think this transparent nonsense would fool Walde? It was more than clear to him--as it would be to the ever-suspicious Dark Lord his brother--that Koric had made contact with some revolutionary group on Alderaan and expected to get troops from them to support his attempt at the throne of Sith. They would be happy enough to give Koric what he wanted, too; a malleable and technology-happy Dark Lord on the throne would give Alderaan--and the Empire--exactly the opening they wanted in Sith. And all too soon Koric would find himself no more than a pawn.

Arlen debated what he should do about this letter. He could hardly take it to his brother. Walde would not expect him to betray his son--family feeling ran deep among all the Vaders--and such a move would undoubtedly set Walde to wondering what kind of a double game he was playing. And if, by some remarkable chance, the letter had escaped the Dark Lord's attention . . . Arlen shook his head with a little sigh; it was a very slim chance, but it was just barely possible. If he brought it to Walde's attention, the entire family would be in danger of slow termination in one of the surprisingly modern chambers in the depths of the Dark Lord's Security building, if not public execution in the main square. Left to himself, Walde might ignore the whole thing for any of a half a dozen reasons; if forced to notice it, he would have to take action. No, he could not take the letter to the Dark Lord.

He was not really implicated, Arlen decided. The letter clearly said that Koric had taken action without his knowledge or consent. Perhaps the Duke and his wife and children could escape blame for the entire situation, if he did nothing overt in support of his son. Walde knew Koric was headstrong; and he had enough contempt for Arlen's cowardice . . .

And, of course, Arlen thought, Koric always MIGHT succeed. If his son should win the struggle, it would not look good if the Duke had acted in support of the present Dark Lord. The boy did have supporters among the nobility, after all, and this Alderaani army might be enough to put him over the edge into victory against Walde. It would be extremely unfortunate if

he were to be executed instead by his own son's party. It was an irony Walde would certainly appreciate from whatever vantage point he might have at that time, but Arlen did not feel he himself would much enjoy the joke.

The safest thing was to do nothing at all.

Arlen leaned back and raised his glass in a mocking salute to his brother and his son. "My lords, upon your honor: Lay on!" Arlen said softly, quoting the ancient formula for combat upon the tourney field. In this joust, he would stand outside the lists. He drained his glass and flicked on the voicewrite he had bought from the Imperial importer, and began:

"My son Koric: Perhaps it would be best if you did not contact me again. . . ."



Jessha had just turned fourteen, and it was her betrothal celebration. All her perceptions seemed to be heightened and yet fragmented by the strange fluttery feeling in her stomach, half excitement and half fear, as she prepared to take her place in the receiving line for the first time. She was aware of the heavy flower-scent, almost nauseating, from the gardens she could see through the wide open doors across the room from her. It was one of the rare clear nights on the Sith, free of fog, mist, or rain. The gravel paths shone under the full moon like a river and the leaves looked as if they were made of beaten silver, cold, hard, and perfect. Very like the Dark Lord, their master, Jessha thought in passing: cold, hard, and . . . perfect. She had not wanted to come here to the Dark Lord's palace for the betrothal, but custom demanded it, as custom demanded the marriage itself.

Yet, there was no question she was looking her best tonight. Her pale hair still hung loose to her waist under the jeweled bride's coronet, as it would until she was married, but her dress had a train--a real train--and it was cut low over her small bosom to mark her newly adult status. She shifted her feet, feeling the sensuous weight of moss-green velvet around them, and caught the end of her veil, transparent gold-shot gauze, in her fingertips. She almost gave a little skip of pure excitement before she caught her mother's warning expression from the cluster of Duke Arlen's Household and supporters near the door. Instantly, she composed herself, primly solemn. She must not forget there were enemies here as well as friends. She relaxed a bit at her mother's pleased smile before the Duchess turned to her husband the Grand Duke, who was laughing and expansive as usual in public, his face slightly flushed with wine and the rather brittle good humor of the gathering.

There really was quite a crowd, Jessha noticed. The betrothal of the Heir of Sith to his cousin was the social event of the year, and the towering Great Hall was packed with the nobility of Sith and numerous foreign visitors, all dressed in their best. She was very conspicuously at the center of it all; she could almost feel the currents of intrigue, the tentative diplomacies and shifting alliances swirling around her under the surface calm. Suddenly she felt uneasy, out of her depth. She sent her

mother an uncertain look, and the Duchess came over. She adjusted Jessha's elaborate puffed and tied sleeves, and, under cover of the casual movement, put a firm hand on Jessha's arm. "Bear up, child," she said. "Remember who you are." Then she relented with a tiny smile and added, "Don't worry; you look beautiful. You will do us proud, little skywalker." Jessha managed a wavering smile in answer to the childhood nickname, and gave her mother's hand a grateful squeeze as the Duchess turned to return to her place.

Jessha's betrothed came up from behind to join her, and she glanced at him curiously out of the corner of her eye. She recalled him from family gatherings as a quiet boy who seldom smiled, very much on his dignity and conscious of his position, with a superior air that had always irritated her. She did not know him at all. He had hardly spoken to her, even after their parents had agreed to the match; indeed, he seemed to be trying to ignore her presence as much as possible, and his shield was up completely.

Why doesn't he talk to me? Jessha wondered. He bowed stiffly over her hand with cold and perfect courtesy, his face blank, and said nothing. Jessha thought she had never seen such a look of inhuman control on so young a face. Perhaps he was angry with her? Disliked her? But what could she have done to make him dislike her? A little nervous annoyance stirred in her, a defense against his possible mood. But there was no expression at all on his face, nothing she could even identify as distaste. After all, Jessha considered, Darth is only a child, really: a whole year younger than I am. Maybe he's just nervous. . . .

She was saved from trying to make conversation with him by the line of guests which was suddenly moving past her, each requiring a word of greeting, a chance to curtsy or bow to her. She was glad that, in spite of her mother's endless drill, she did not have to remember all their names and titles. The herald-pursuivant--how strange it was to have a human instead of a protocol droid like the one at her father's estate, Jessha thought irrelevantly--murmured identifications in her ear as each person arrived at her place in line. She smiled and nodded graciously and remembered her politest formulas of address.

When the last of them had passed, the Dark Lord signaled from his chair of estate on the dais, and the music began. Darth took her hand and led her out at the head of the processional pavane. She concentrated on the graceful dips and gliding steps, on keeping her back straight and managing her new train in the turns. Everyone would be watching her. She didn't dare divert enough attention to see what the audience of courtiers and hangers-on along the walls was doing. "Left, together; right, together; rise, and--" she breathed soundlessly, her face grim. They reached the foot of the dais and she sank into a profound curtsy with her eyes lowered. She didn't want to look up at the Dark Lord; he terrified her. She shielded desperately, trying to prevent him from sensing her fear, but she knew it was hopeless.

Darth took a firmer hold on her hand and swung Jessha gracefully into the first figure of the dance. She felt, faintly, something akin to gratitude that he had rescued her from her terrible uncle's attention. Perhaps she could even grow to like Darth. After a few moments, she began to be more confident. This was no more difficult than her dancing lessons

at home, and her feet moved almost automatically in the familiar steps. She unglued her eyes from the couple ahead of them in the figure and shot quick, sideways glances at her partner, trying not to be too obvious as she studied him.

He was almost exactly her height. Most boys Jessha knew of Darth's age were shorter than she, and she was glad that he had started to get his growth. It was so much easier dancing with someone who was tall enough, and they really would have looked a little silly if he were much shorter. All the same, she thought critically, his legs were much too long and he was undeniably all knees and elbows, for all that he moved gracefully enough. Her urge to snicker at his gangling frame died instantly as her eyes reached his face. He was lost in his own thoughts, concentrating on the dance or some other preoccupation, no longer completely expressionless, and there was a rigid intensity to him, a wary and secretive look like a defensive wall. And something else. Beneath the barrier, Jessha was puzzled to see, she thought, a sort of dead and hopeless longing, a hunger without expectation. It was the look Jessha had seen on the pinched face of a beggar child on one of her father's progresses. Why should Darth look like that? Jessha thought in confusion. He was the prince, the Heir of Sith. Surely he did not lack anything.

Moved by some obscure sympathy, she tried to smile. "You dance well, Cousin."

The corners of Darth's mouth turned up like a lid opening painfully on rusty hinges. "And you, Cousin. I am honored to have such a beautiful and charming partner." He sounded as if he were reciting a lesson, but he seemed friendly enough.

Jessha preened a little and continued more warmly, "My mother showed me the necklace and bracelets you sent as a betrothal gift. They're very pretty. I love sapphires. It's too bad I can't wear them until after we're married."

"They belonged to my lady mother. She died when I was born, you know."

Jessha had a sudden vision of Darth, living alone in this vast palace, with no companions except servants and the terrible Dark Lord his father. She shuddered slightly. "That's very sad, Cousin. I'd miss my mother very much if she weren't here. Still, my father always did things with us children also--he took my brothers hunting and taught them swordplay and riding and hawking. Did you and the old Lord--" She stopped. It was impossible to imagine.

An expression she couldn't decipher flitted over Darth's face. "His Highness of Sith has more important tasks than playing games with children."

Jessha bit her lip. This was not going well. Her cousin had seemed to be thawing a bit, but the reference to his father had frozen him solid again. She gave him a slightly apologetic look. "Tell me, Cousin: have you had good hunting this season?"

The conversation limped onward as they broke and reformed in the

geometric figures of the dance. Finally the music gave a flourish and stopped as Jessha sank into a reverence with a swirl of skirts. She beamed up at her partner in pride and relief at having completed the dance without a mistake. Her enthusiasm was infectious. She caught the faintest answering eagerness in her partner's eyes, and he smiled at her a little, shyly, and then with a slowly growing openness. He reached out a hand to help Jessha to her feet.

Before Jessha could thank Darth for his hand, a trumpet sounded and the herald announced: "General Master Obi-Wan Kenobi!" There was a surprised stirring in the crowd as a tall, bearded man in his forties came striding vigorously down the steps into the Great Hall, nodding amiably and exuding an air of good will. The Sith courtiers melted aside to let him pass, the ladies drawing their skirts out of the way with unmistakable lack of cordiality just short of outright insult and the high-born lords half-bristling with suppressed hostility. His aura was clear to the members of the nobility with Force-sense, and Jessha caught it also: the General shimmered in her perception with a strange foreign quality unlike anything she had ever felt before, a signature in the Force subtly alien and irritatingly out of phase with her own, a quality just different enough to be uncomfortable, similar enough that it was impossible to ignore or block out. It rasped her nerves like a stringed instrument slightly out of tune. Yet there was tremendous power in it. As she considered it, she realized it did not feel evil, merely . . . different; ordered to a separate pattern. Jessha felt she could almost grasp it if she tried--a little shift, and it would fall into place, and that annoying out-of-phase resonance would harmonize. She would capture it . . .

The General ignored the unfriendly whispering and rustling of the crowd around him. He projected peacefulness, lack-of-threat, harmony . . . peacefulness, harmony, harmony . . . Like oil on water, an air of calm spread out from him, and the gathering resumed its studiously convivial tone as interest shifted away from him. He arrived at the foot of the dais and presented himself to the Dark Lord. Here, though, he had met his match. Jessha watched, seeing that her uncle greeted General Kenobi with a noticeable coolness in no way influenced by the cheerful inoffensiveness she could still feel him projecting in the Force. She could not tell because of her lack of training whether the General was incapable of overmastering the Dark Lord's shield or merely declined the contest. She shrugged mentally. It was no concern of hers.

Jessha turned back to Darth and was amazed to see a totally incongruous and unexpected grin spread across his face. It looked so out of place she simply stared at him. "Obi-Wan Kenobi!" he said. He sounded delighted.

Jessha felt a twinge of jealousy. "What is General Kenobi doing here? I thought the Dark Lord didn't want Jedi in Sith, and certainly not General Kenobi. Didn't he tell them not to come back after the Clone War Alliance ended?"

"Yes, yes," Darth said impatiently. "But with General Kenobi it's a special case and there is nothing my lord father can do to prevent him visiting Sith. He's not just a Jedi master; he's a general of the armies of Alderaan, and that's just about the same as a general of the armies of the

entire Empire. Even my lord father can't afford to offend Alderaan by refusing audience to one of her representatives. He comes here every so often," he added, "to see me."

To see you?" Jessha said, startled.

Darth turned to look at her as if dragging his attention back reluctantly. "Yes. He told me--Master Kenobi told me--that I have the strongest Force ability he's ever seen in someone my age. He wants me to become a Jedi and study at his school at Ruwenjorin."

"Ruwenjorin! A Sith at Ruwenjorin?" The words were out of Jessha's mouth before she had time to consider them. The idea was completely unexpected. There had never, so far as she could remember from her studies or the gossip of the adults around her, been a member of Sith nobility who had studied at a Jedi school. "Jedi and Sith: Fire and water" ran the old Sith proverb, and Jessha had never heard of a Sith who wanted to disprove that saying. Confused, she ventured, "Do you want to go, Cousin?"

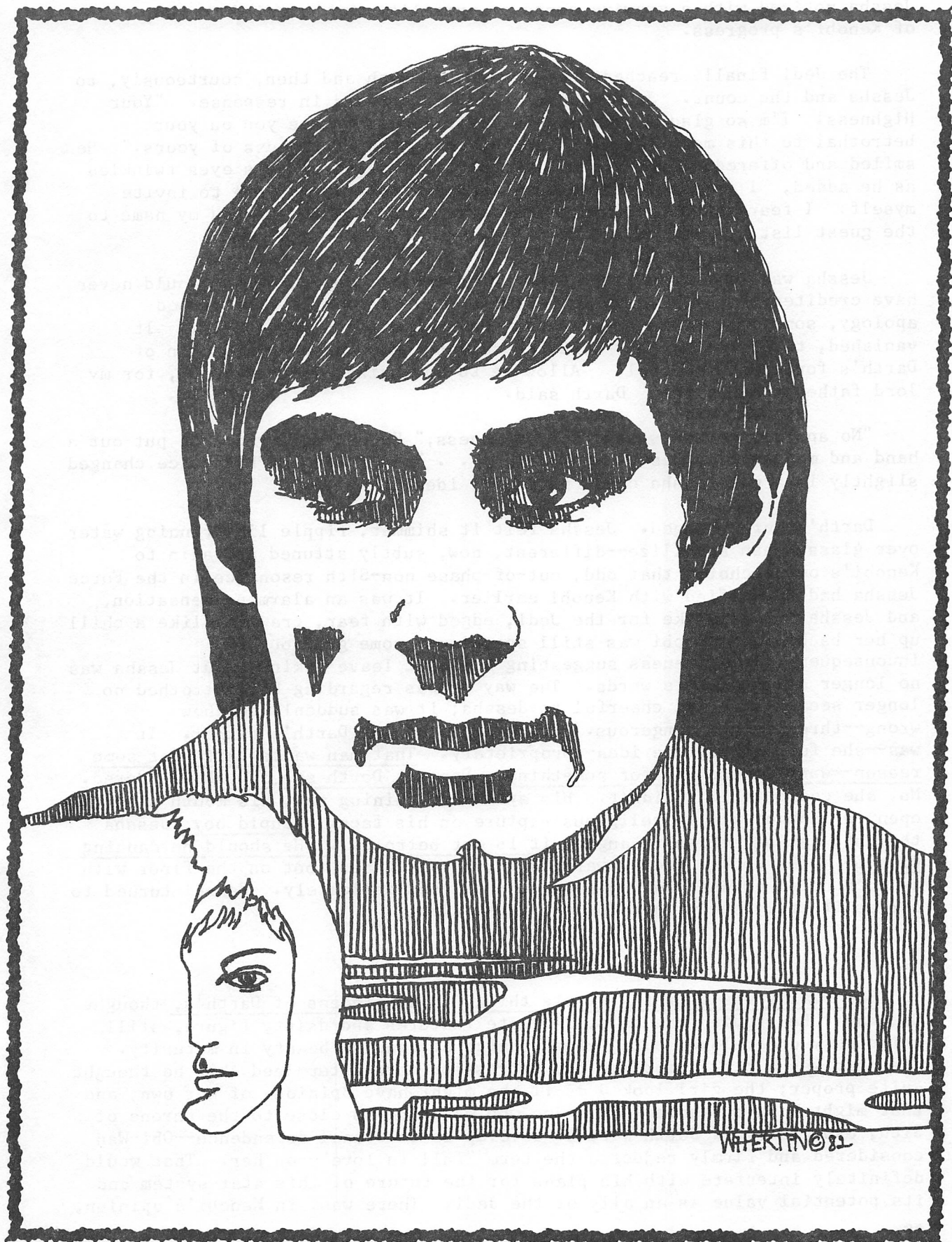
At her question, such longing blazed up in Darth's face that Jessha was astonished. He looked like an entirely different person, his dark eyes lively and sparkling, his face alight, his aristocratic reserve gone. It was the first time she had ever seen him look like a thirteen-year-old boy, the first time she had seen a look of unself-conscious and uncalculated interest in anything around him. Then gradually the cold mask crept across his features again, the light dimmed out of his eyes, and he looked down, sullenly, and said, "My lord father will not permit it. My duty is to Sith. He doesn't want any Jedi wizard interfering with the succession; the Heir's loyalty must be to Vader, Sith, and his people. His Highness says." Jessha could hear the bitterness in his voice.

She noticed that General Kenobi was heading in their direction across the crowded room like an icebreaker worrying its way slowly through a field of pack ice. Darth evidently noticed him as well, for the young prince looked around desperately until he caught the eye of the nearest member of the crowd who could, by any standard, be considered nobility. With a small sigh of what seemed to Jessha to be relief, Darth gestured Count Gaowan to join them, and the plump, foppish little lord bustled over.

"Your Highness?" Gaowan was casting nervous, fawning glances at his young lord, as if he were not sure whether Darth were going to bite or not.

"If you would attend my lady for a few moments, Count Gaowan--"

The count bowed over Jessha's hand and launched into a series of flowery compliments. She responded absently, staring at Darth in total disbelief. Surely he couldn't intend to leave her in the escort of this insignificant minor lordling from one of the outer Sith Worlds, not at her own betrothal? She tried to communicate her horror to him without resort to public use of the Force--it would hardly do for anyone else to read her situation, and it would surely insult the harmless little count who had offered her nothing but courtesy. She practically vibrated with the strength of her attempt to reach Darth. It was no use; Darth was oblivious to her best efforts. He was staring distractedly over their heads, all but dancing on his toes,



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Jessha noticed with a growing sense of unreality, as he tried to keep track of Kenobi's progress.

The Jedi finally reached them, bowed to Darth and then, courteously, to Jessha and the count. Jessha automatically curtsied in response. "Your Highness! I'm so glad I arrived in time to congratulate you on your betrothal to this most beautiful and charming young princess of yours." He smiled and offered Jessha a courtly gesture of respect. His eyes twinkled as he added, "I am most honored to attend--even if I did have to invite myself. I fear your lord father the Dark Lord neglected to add my name to the guest list."

Jessha was amazed to see, for a brief moment, something she would never have credited on the face of an Heir of Sith: a look of embarrassed apology, something, almost, she might have identified as pleading. It vanished, to be replaced by cold and sullen anger and then a return of Darth's former icy control. "Allow me to apologize, Master Kenobi, for my lord father's oversight," Darth said.

"No apology is necessary, Your Highness," Kenobi answered. He put out a hand and made a tiny gesture. "Darth . . ." he said, and his voice changed slightly in a way Jessha could not quite identify.

Darth's aura changed. Jessha felt it shimmer, ripple like running water over glass, then stabilize--different, now, subtly attuned and akin to Kenobi's own, echoing that odd, out-of-phase non-Sith resonance in the Force Jessha had identified with Kenobi earlier. It was an alarming sensation, and Jessha felt dislike for the Jedi, edged with fear, crawling like a chill up her backbone. Kenobi was still speaking: some gracious and inconsequential politeness suggesting imminent leave-taking. But Jessha was no longer attending his words. The way he was regarding her betrothed no longer seemed fond and cheerful to Jessha; it was suddenly somehow wrong--threatening, dangerous. It reminded her of Darth's father. It was--she fumbled for the idea--proprietary. That man wants Darth for some reason--want to use him for something. Doesn't Darth see it? she wondered. No, she could tell he didn't. His eyes were shining now, his mouth slightly open, a look of almost religious rapture on his face. Stupid boy, Jessha thought, taking refuge in anger; it is our betrothal. He should be dancing with me. She took a step toward Darth, scraping her foot on the floor with as much noise as she could manage, and coughed delicately. Kenobi turned to her as if truly seeing her for the first time.

She really was a pretty little thing, this princess of Darth's, thought Obi-Wan. He studied the pale, delicate features and dainty figure, still childishly undeveloped but giving promise of genuine beauty in maturity. The chin was a bit firmer and the expression more determined than he thought quite proper; the girl looked as if she might have opinions of her own, and that might be a nuisance in someone who would be so close to the throne of Sith, especially if Darth were to develop an emotional dependence--Obi-Wan considered and firmly rejected the term "fall in love"--on her. That would definitely interfere with his plans for the future of this star system and its potential value as an ally of the Jedi. There was, in Kenobi's opinion,

room for only one emotional dependence in the young Sith Heir's life, and Obi-Wan Kenobi did not intend that it should be his wife.

Still, she appeared to be intelligent and healthy enough. Good breeding stock, Kenobi thought cynically; and in an aristocratic line as inbred--as artificially manipulated by the Genetic Council--as the Vaders, that was remarkable in itself. Not that Obi-Wan had any real complaints about the results of the Council's decisions: Darth was unquestionably the strongest Force-sensitive he had ever seen, and even in the child's present state, with the laughable Sith excuse for Force-training, his talent and potential were--awesome. Awesome, valuable, and tremendously dangerous without proper guidance and control, guidance and control only the Jedi could provide.

Good breeding stock, yes, Kenobi repeated to himself, as he expanded his perception to examine the princess's Force-signature. Her Force ability was very strong indeed, almost as strong as Darth's, even though it was completely random and untrained except in the most rudimentary way. If Darth had children by this girl, they would be . . . remarkable. Kenobi found the idea intriguing.

There was no point in alienating the girl, Kenobi thought. She seemed harmless enough, charming, really; and it should be an excellent marriage. He would do his best to make himself agreeable. Darth seemed to have the situation well in hand: he had evidently delegated this nervous and effusive little count as a substitute to take care of the princess while Kenobi had his usual conversation with the young prince. Very good. Let the princess have a few dances with Gaowan and he and Darth should be back soon enough. They would probably not even be missed, except by the ever-watchful Dark Lord. Kenobi had no hope anything his son did would escape the old Lord's attention.

Kenobi put on his most winning manner and turned to Jessha. "I ask your Grace's pardon. I deeply regret that I must offer your Grace such a discourtesy, especially upon the occasion of your Grace's betrothal, but I am compelled to beg a word with his Highness. Will your Grace be so good as to allow--"

However, General Kenobi had miscalculated slightly.

As he and Darth went out into the garden to speak privately, Darth following the Jedi with the bemused and fascinated air of someone enchanted, Jessha stared after them in total outrage. The musicians tuned up for another dance and she felt horribly exposed, as if she had been stripped naked and displayed in front of the entire crowd for their amusement. Darth should be here to dance with her; how dare he abandon her like this in front of everyone?

Count Gaowan fluttered around her, babbling at her; she heard his voice as if from far away: "Your Grace, my lady Princess; may I bring your Grace a glass of wine? Your Grace looks pale; is your Grace unwell? Would your Grace care to go outside for a breath of cool air? Would your Grace please to sit down? My lady Princess . . . ?"

She ignored him, infuriated beyond the limits of politeness. She was not allowed to dance with anyone except her betrothed at her betrothal feast. Her mother had made it quite clear to Jessha that it would be a scandal. And everyone--EVERYONE, Jessha thought in anguish--would wonder why she wasn't dancing the mershef the musicians were beginning. She recognized the tune. It was one of her favorites and they had included it on the program just for her. Heads were turned in her direction now, waiting for her to lead out the figure. Where was Darth? How could he do this to her?

She writhed in inner torment as she looked around the room for him. There, there were three ladies-in-waiting right there looking at her and whispering behind their hands, giggling. She was sure they were talking about her. An impressive older woman Jessha recognized as Lady Mavlore, social arbiter of the Dark Lord's court ever since the Dark Lord's Lady had died, was eyeing her with a stern look of--Jessha was positive--disgust. How shameless, the lady's look seemed to be saying, for Jessha to be standing here in the public company of another man than Jessha's intended lord, at Jessha's own betrothal feast. But it's not my fault! Jessha cried silently to Lady Mavlore and the world in general. Jessha noticed her parents watching her also. Her mother looked worried, and her poor father had such an expression of towering fury on his face, Jessha was almost afraid the Duke might do something rash. At least THEY'RE on my side, Jessha thought. Theirs were the only sympathetic faces she could see. Every other human being in the Great Hall seemed, to her heightened sensitivity, to be staring right at her, either outraged or laughing maliciously at her. All Jessha wanted to do was crawl away somewhere and hide from them all.

The cowardly impulse lasted only a moment. Her humiliation was replaced by rage, the all-devouring, killing Vader rage that had become a byword in Sith since the accession of Jessha's House. "I swear on my honor as a princess of Sith," Jessha muttered to herself through clenched teeth, "that you will pay for this, Cousin Darth!" She gathered up her skirts, bade the flustered count a courteous farewell, and went to join her parents.



Walde Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith, pushed aside the last dispatch and transferred it to the pile beside him on the desk. The heap quivered, threatening to topple, and he straightened it, automatically checking to make sure his signature on the top document was legible and the seal properly placed. A wandering breeze drifted in the window, bringing the scent of spring flowers from the garden and the distant sound of a luthra's small song greeting the new year. Walde permitted himself a small sigh, and flexed his hands to get rid of the cramp. How long had it been since he had had time to walk in the garden? He tried to remember. Of course, he COULD buy a computer system, he thought, as he usually did at about this stage in his paperwork. One computer for the palace was hardly a danger to the stability of Sith. But let one in, and the lesser lords would want them also, and from there . . . No, he decided once again, with mild regret: no computer. Besides, he enjoyed the feel of the stylus and the crispness

of paper under his hand. That was a pleasure no machine could provide. A man must be master of his tools, master of himself.

Walde rubbed his hand across his forehead. The familiar gnawing pain was beginning in his belly, sending tendrils of fire outward, and the pressure behind his eyes threatened to join it as a headache. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the Force, reaching for the cool, dark reservoir of peace within him that was farther away with each passing day. Slowly, the pain ebbed and he was in control again. Each time it took more effort to subdue it, called for more of his fading reserve of strength. Someday that trick is not going to work anymore, he thought dispassionately. He drew a breath. Just a little longer, until Darth is ready

There it was again--the fear that drove him, that drove him to drive his son. How much time? Not enough. And so many enemies . . . The Empire, hungry and powerful, insidiously alluring. And those who served the Empire's interests here in Sith: some dupes, ready to sell out their own for a worthless handful of trinkets, and some knowing traitors. Some, even, in his own family. His brother Arlen was no threat. Walde had nothing but contempt for the self-indulgent, lazy, easygoing Duke, who had neither the vision for ambition nor the courage to realize it. All Arlen cared about was filling his belly and his bed, Walde thought with disgust. The man, for all his rank, had the spirit of a peasant. No, there was no threat there.

But Arlen's son--the Dark Lord frowned. Koric had been showing disquieting signs of enterprise and ability lately. And there was the matter of this recent letter to Arlen which had been discovered by Walde's agent. The boy might prove dangerous. Was it time to remove him? Walde asked himself. No, not yet. Let the malcontents continue to center their hopes on Koric, who could be easily watched, rather than on some other figurehead who might be harder to identify and forestall. Koric was no threat to him either, yet. But before he left Darth unprotected, Arlen's boy must be eliminated. How much time?

His thoughts turned to his son, and Walde smiled very slightly. It would never do to let the child know how he pleased his father. The Prince of Sith must demand nothing less than perfection from his heir. And a Dark Lord must trust no one, depend on no one, love no one. For his safety after his father was gone, Darth must learn that lesson well.

For a moment, the old regret stirred in Walde that he had no second son, no other child to whom he dared open himself, to whom he dared show his love, as Walde's father had had Arlen. Walde's wife had died bearing Darth, doing her duty to the line of Vader, as Walde had done--would do--his duty, and the Dark Lord had never wanted to remarry. One heir was adequate. Adequate, Walde thought with a recurring sense of unease, if he could keep the child safe; if he lived . . .

Walde thought bitterly again of the Empire, the uncaring Empire whose very blessings were cursed, the Empire with its droids and its hungry power. The Empire's machines could have saved the mother of his heir, but Walde's father had not permitted it. At least I will allow that, Walde thought, a medidroid for my daughter-in-law, for her lying-in when Darth had done HIS duty by the Sith. None of my blood and of the line of Vader will

be risked in THIS generation; the inheritance is too precarious, and it must not fall to Arlen's children. Darth's child will be strong in the Force, stronger even, perhaps, than this, my excellent son, my son who will be the best, the most perfect, Dark Lord the Sith has ever seen. This, my son, who will justify all my hopes, my sacrifices, and my long struggle.

Yes, pleased Walde was in his son. The child showed admirable promise: a good boy--diligent, courageous, competent in everything he did, self-controlled. And strong-minded, too; Walde smiled again. Darth was as obedient to him as a dutiful son should be, but he had the will and spirit of a thoroughbred. When he finally ruled, no one could hold him. He would be a prince, indeed.

However, there was the problem of the Jedi, Kenobi, and Darth's unreasonable and childish enthusiasm for him. Walde had no fondness for Jedi under any circumstances. He considered them a ridiculously snobbish group, making great secrets out of Force techniques the Sith had known for centuries, and cloaking all kinds of simple natural processes in mystical nonsense to baffle the uninitiated. And as for their silly rituals with the lightsword, as if it were more honorable than any other tool for killing . . . A man's honor lay in his birth and his conduct, not in his weapons, Walde held.

More than that, the Jedi were dangerous. For far too long they had been the authority behind the thrones and governments of the Republic, ruling with near-absolute, if disguised, power. They had gained a taste for control, for manipulation, on a grand scale, and a certain carelessness of how they used that control, based on long unchecked privilege. They had never had such power in Sith; Walde thanked the Bright Lord and his ancestors for that. Force-sensitives themselves, the Dark Lords had no awe of Jedi tricks. The conflict between Sith and Jedi had been long and bitter, if covert, and distrust of them was bred in Walde's bones. Now the Empire was moving to control them also, to reduce them to their proper role as servants of the state. And high time, too, the Dark Lord thought. But now the Jedi were desperate for allies in their new struggle, and Darth would make a powerful one. Darth--who was as strong with the Force as any the Sith had bred for generations; Darth, who would rule an independent system some day, a perfect base from which to carry the Jedi's war back to the Imperial worlds.

Darth is mine, thought Walde: mine and Sith's! No meeching Jedi wizard is going to steal him from me!

There was a tapping on the door. That would be Darth, Walde knew, as he checked the desk chrono. Punctual as always. "Come," he called.

Darth's step as he entered was firm and determined. His son was looking very well, Walde decided; very well indeed in his doublet of garnet velvet slashed over amber silk and the heavy gold-and-ruby shoulder-chain he favored. The colors set off Darth's pale complexion and the heavy bronze hair that lay on his shoulders like a helmet. Even in civilian dress, his son looked as if he went clad in armor. Despite the adolescent gawkiness, the over-large hands showing below the frill of linen at his wrists and the emphatic knees in his close-fitting hosen, the boy moved with the controlled

assurance of a warrior-in-training. Walde was reminded of the combative spirit, the fierce, graceful belligerence, of a two-year-old wellet buck challenging the herd stag, as Darth stood before him. There was the same sense of barely leashed power-to-be and the nervous threat not yet quite realized but suggested.

"My lord father sent for me?" Very good, Walde thought with satisfaction: there was no tremor in his son's voice. Darth had controlled his fear and was shielding remarkably well, even against his father.

"I am displeased with your conduct, my son. You require correction." Correction. The austere wording of the old Book passed through Walde's mind: "Whom the lord loveth, he chasteneth." There had always been a healthy and appropriate confusion in Walde's mind between the Lord of the Book and the old Dark Lord his father, a confusion Walde knew his own son had inherited. And surely, Walde thought, he loved this his good son, as his own father, the late Dark Lord, had loved him, Walde, best of all. His father had lain on Walde far more than he had ever required--more than he could ever have required--of his useless brother Arlen. Arlen would never have survived it and become Dark Lord. As Darth in his turn would endure it. No, Walde amended as he watched the proud young man standing straight before him, his head at an arrogant angle, his cold face fearless and expressionless even before his awesome lord and father. Only his own long practice in complete self-control prevented Walde's pride in his heir from showing. This son of his, Darth, would not survive merely; he would conquer.

But first he must learn what it meant to be a Dark Lord's heir.

"Your behavior last night was most discourteous. The Duke your uncle was displeased." Walde's voice took on a calculated edge. "I trust that after you are married, you will be able to keep track of your lady's whereabouts?"

Darth's mouth tightened, but he gave no other sign of the anger Walde could feel seeping around the edges of his shield. "I regret that the lord Duke was offended," he said cautiously. "I will be more careful of my cousin Jessha in the future."

"You dishonor yourself when you dishonor your lady; and you dishonor me. Proper courtesy at your betrothal feast is to remain in attendance upon your lady and to dance with her, not to engage in idle conversation with--other guests. I had thought you adequately instructed as to your duty in this matter. Perhaps I was misinformed?"

"No, my lord father."

"Then the blame is entirely yours. Have you any explanation for your conduct?"

"No, my lord father."

The boy was wary, fencing. Walde could sense Darth's tension, waiting for the real subject of his father's displeasure to emerge. The Dark Lord felt a stirring of ironic humor: a politician already, Walde thought.

There was no point in avoiding the issue any longer. "You were seen speaking with Kenobi for nearly a timepart during the evening."

Anger flickered in Darth's eyes for a moment, then vanished. So you set your dogs on my trail again, to spy on me secretly, the look said. Walde ignored it.

"Yes, my lord father," Darth said.

"Your courtesy to this Jedi is excessive and unnecessary. You are not required to converse at length with him, and you are well aware that I do not wish you to do so."

"As my lord father is aware, the Jedi are masters of many useful techniques in the Force which would be valuable to a Dark Lord. I wish to learn from Master Kenobi, for the good of Sith. My lord father knows the good of Sith motivates me in all things."

Ah, courage, too, Walde thought. "The good of Sith is not served by the meddling of Jedi tricksters in our affairs."

"Master Kenobi does not meddle. And, my lord father, we can use his help, the help of the Order. They are Force-folk, as we are, and haven't they also suffered at the hands of the Empire? We can work with them, surely?"

"Thou child!" said Walde, deliberately switching to the familiar mode of address, and seeing his son flush at the insult. "Kenobi does not meddle, you say? I can feel his taint in your aura still." Darth's Force-signature had returned to its normal Sith pattern, but Walde could still identify the shadowy residue of Kenobi's presence, like a ghostly double exposure. The Dark Lord continued, "The Jedi are no one's allies. They will be masters or nothing. No people that has given them power has, in the end, been anything but their tool. Sith is mine, and while I breathe, it will be no Jedi's thing!" Nor will my son, he thought, shielding.

Something moved in the depths of Darth's still expression, something cold and dark and hungry. Walde recognized it as an echo of his own will to power. Sith is mine. Someday Sith would be Darth's, and in that, Walde saw, he had glimpsed the core of his son's being and his son's final loyalty. The Dark Lord smiled a little, inwardly, mollified. This inexplicable infatuation with the Jedi would pass in time; the child was basically sound. Sith was his heart, as it was his father's heart, and the Dark Lord could leave his heritage in his son's hands without fear when the time came.

"I will have no more argument. Kenobi means no good to the Sith, and he means no good to you. From now on, you will offer the Jedi the necessary courtesies when he comes, and nothing more."

Darth bent his head. "Yes, my lord father." It was a lie, and they both knew it was a lie, but it preserved the forms between them. Darth would obey--outwardly. For the moment, that was all that mattered, until Walde could convince his son of the threat Kenobi represented to the Sith,

and for that, all Walde needed was time. How much time? Bright Lord, give me just a little longer, Walde prayed silently.

"You may go," the Dark Lord said, and Darth bowed himself out of the room.

Walde felt the pain beginning again as he turned back to his work.



Walde lived to see his heir married two years later, as arranged, to the lady Jessha. An uneasy peace continued on the surface among the royal family, and neither the Dark Lord nor the Duke his father mentioned Koric in the other's hearing. Whatever either knew of that young man's dubious contacts and activities on Alderaan remained unspoken, tacitly ignored. Years of mutual contempt had worn the brothers into understanding and a sort of wary forbearance. The Dark Lord would do nothing against his own kin until the threat was proven and the time ripe, until his preparations were complete, until his enemy's destruction was assured. The Duke waited and watched like an animal before a thunderstorm, nervously apprehensive but resigned under the still, oppressive air, and, as usual, did--nothing. And through it all, plans went forward to unite the young Heir of Sith and his cousin for reasons of state, according to the dictates of the Sith Genetic Council and the Dark Lord's good pleasure.

Afterward, everyone agreed that it had been the most splendid of weddings. The altar of the great cathedral was ablaze with candles, gleaming on snowy linen and gold embroidery, glinting in the jeweled silver sacramental vessels, flickering through the haze of incense that haloed each tiny flame like mist against the sun. The voices of the choristers rose sweet and pure, ethereal, perfect, and indifferent as angels' voices, toward the far-off ceiling, where the carved images of the ancient nobility of Sith looked down across the centuries on their distant heirs. Far below, in the glittering dazzle, two half-trained children knelt to accept the burden of their inheritance and be joined together, unwilling, for the good of Sith, as lord and lady.

When the ceremony was done, Jessha stood in the center of the fading brightness to watch the candles extinguished one by one on the altar before the recessional. The lights are going out, she thought with a kind of distracted unease that was not quite fear; is it an omen? She cast a sideways look at her new husband as she waited under the priest's uplifted hand for the final blessing. Darth was grimly solemn, his face pale and remote from her in the dignity of the Dark Lord's heir. But it was, Jessha noted, a boy's face still. Jessha's jaw set. No, Cousin Darth, she thought, shielding, I am not afraid of you. You and I are of the same blood, and I am as much a Vader as you. I will uphold my House. She took a breath and armored herself with pride.

The recessional began and Darth turned to offer Jessha his forearm for the long journey back down the aisle. "My lady wife," he said, with something that, behind the defensive barrier, might have been the most hesitant and tentative of smiles. His shield was lowered to her very

slightly, and Jessha felt from him an uncertain warmth, and something else:
. . . my lady WIFE . . . a nervous but determined stirring of anticipation,
a looking forward to the night to come.

No! Jessha thought. Panicky revulsion swept over her for a moment. The things her mother had told her about her wedding night would be hard enough to face with someone she cared for, trusted. Her mother had spoken serenely of the Duke her father's gentleness and kindness, although the Duchess had been vague as to the details, but the Duke had been eighteen and, Jessha's mother had hinted, experienced in such matters. Not this--this-- Jessha faced her new husband squarely. She had trusted him once and he had abandoned and humiliated her in front of his entire court. She felt an echo of that anger, and it fortified her. She met his look with cold hauteur, I will uphold my House.

Darth's shield slammed down and he returned her look. I, too. They reached the front of the nave, and Darth handed Jessha to her attendants. He nodded to the gorgeously robed archpriest who waited.

He blessed them again, Darth first and then Jessha. "Prepare the Bride with all ceremony for the honor of her marriage bed," he said loudly: ritual words. He gave Jessha an encouraging smile, then her lord. "The Bright Lord go with you both, my lord and lady; and give you all happiness," he added softly.

They thanked him, then Jessha joined her attendants and Darth his groomsmen for the final traditional ceremonies before the bedding.

All too soon, for Jessha, it was time. The room was prepared, the marriage-bed perfumed and blessed to bring fertility to the royal couple, and all things made ready. Laughing, joking, the wedding party led the couple up the wide stair to the state bedroom, where the Heirs of Sith had spent their wedding night since the castle was built, according to tradition. In all things, the House of Vader held to tradition.

"Out--all of you," Darth said shortly.

The last of the wedding party and the servants filed out, leaving the bride and bridegroom alone, and the heavy carved doors swung shut with a dull thud that sounded like the lid closing down on a coffin. Why does everything in this dreary old place remind me so of a mausoleum? Princess Jessha asked herself with a faint shudder as she turned away from her husband. I don't think there's a thing anywhere in this palace that's less than three centuries old--not even the servants. She thought longingly of her bedroom in her father's palace, with its bright imported holopictures on the walls, its fictiontapes, the old collection of dollroids her father had given her, one for each birthday . . . Childish things, yet comforting. But now, with this night, she could be a child no longer.

She stood with her left hand over the back of her right, and the pearls sewn to the back of her white kid gloves ground into her palm as she clenched them shut into fists. Her knees trembled slightly, not with

fear--she told herself that with a surge of angry pride--but with the tension of the endless day and the weight of the heavy cream silk wedding dress. Every inch of it was stiff with seed pearls and opals, and the train was edged in pure silver thread that dragged at her every step. She shook one long sleeve back into place and regarded it with loathing. It was the traditional Sith wedding gown, the design handed down for generations, and the Sith princess could be married in nothing else. Jessha was convinced it made her look as if she had been dead for several weeks. As dead as everything else around here, she thought.

Here you are at the tender age of sixteen: alone in your bedchamber with your new husband on your wedding night. How romantic. Where are the violins? Jessa thought dryly. She could feel him behind her, and she restrained the urge to give him a spiteful glance over her shoulder. Evening shadows and a listening silence hung in the corners of the cavernous old room. It seemed cold to Jessha, in spite of the functional modern heating and the fire that blazed on the ancient hearth and glittered in the hundreds of leaded panels of the casement windows. Velvet bedcurtains, embroidered with the Sith luthra-hawk in silver, and welett-hide rugs scattered on the stone flags, seemed to drink in all light and sound. Jessha stared unseeingly at the towering stone mantelpiece, carved with some particularly dull and bloody battle scene from Sith history, and gathered herself for the attack.

"If it please you, my lord husband, I will go to my own apartments for the night. I am very tired from the ceremony." She lowered her eyes and bent her head submissively to hide her faintly malicious smile, ignoring her cold shiver of nervous tension. She didn't have to turn around to read her husband's response. His aura, full of fury, was clear to her in the Force, and her tight smile widened a little.

She could feel Darth glaring at her back. "It does not please me. You will remain here, lady." Her perception acutely sensitive, Jessha heard the faint whisper of cloth on cloth as Darth pulled off his overtunic, the soft sound as he threw it down angrily on the velvet coverlet of the bed, then began unlacing his shirt. "You and I were matched to provide an heir for Sith, and you will give me that heir if I have to drag you to my bed by force."

Jessha turned slowly to face him, controlling her fury with effort. Darth stood half-clad, his hair tousled, a forlorn attempt at icy hauteur unsuccessful on his fifteen-year-old face: "--But I imagine we would both prefer to be spared that--indignity."

"That would prove you are stronger than I. But that is hardly in doubt, is it, my lord?" she said. "However, my father might object to having me mauled about like a Corellian smuggler's wench--even by you. And my brother--" She let the sentence hang in the air.

"Your family had best attend to their own estates and not meddle in things that do not concern them. They will have no power here while I am Heir of Sith, and . . . " He stopped.

" . . . While your father lives."

Their glances locked, and their separate thoughts turned together to the old Dark Lord. The closed, secret look that always followed mention of his father clamped down over Darth's features, and Jessha felt a chill. Since her betrothal, the old Lord had treated her with the most punctilious courtesy, and today at the wedding ceremony he had taken her hand and smiled and called her "daughter." But when she had nerved herself to look up into his face, he had the eyes of something reptilian. They seemed to measure her coldly against some impossible standard by which the old Lord judged the entire world, and find her wanting. I'm a stranger here. And there is Koric . . . she had thought. But when the Dark Lord turned to congratulate his son, she had seen that the eyes did not change. She remembered how Darth had straightened a little more, and the way his face froze into a more impenetrable mask. He does have courage, she thought grudgingly; how could he grow up, facing that awful old man every day?

"And after my father is dead. As my son shall rule when I am gone," Darth said. He took a step toward her. "Shall I help you with your lacing?" By tradition, no one might remove a bride's clothing, once she was dressed in her wedding garments, except the bride's own lord and husband. Jessha was determined that this tradition at least she would avoid, here in the privacy of her own chambers. Their own chambers, she amended reluctantly.

"I can manage alone, thank you, my lord." Jessha began unlacing the ties over her stomach, stiff-fingered, as slowly as possible. Her head felt hot, but her hands were ice cold and strangely clumsy. She took a deep breath and murmured venomously as she completed her task, "Yes; I can manage."

"Come then, my lady wife--to bed!" Darth held out his hand to her in a mockingly chivalric gesture. Jessha stepped out of the pile of cloth around her feet, and laid the very tips of her frozen fingers against his. With her head held high, she mounted the steps to the vast canopied state bed with her lord. Darth handed her up to the surface, and she lay down carefully, rigid, with the smallest possible area of her body touching the sheets, her ankles locked together. She eyed Darth challengingly.

For a moment he hesitated. Stripped of his elegant velvets and his ceremonies, he hardly looked old enough to be a husband. His tall, broad-shouldered body was painfully thin still, awkward here, and adolescent. He had none of the Duke's bulky heartiness or the old Lord's cold command. A faint sneer crossed Jessha's face, daring him.

It was all he needed. Darth flushed with anger and moved toward her. "Do you think you are the first woman I've ever bedded?" he asked. Yes, Jessha's eyes said plainly. With a scowl, Darth caught her wrists in his hands and leaned over her. Jessha closed her eyes and gritted her teeth as she felt him fling himself across her, the sharpness of his ribcage and his hipbones as he pinned her down. His clean masculine scent, tinged with the herbs stored with his body linen, was all around her, and she could taste the wine on his mouth, the "courage cup" that the groom was given as the last traditional gesture before his groomsmen left him alone with his bride.

What followed was protracted, painful, and humiliating. Darth breached

his wife with the ignorant enthusiasm of a captain fielding his first campaign to subdue an enemy stronghold. Jessha lay grimly unresisting, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a useless struggle, and her control survived until her husband, his purpose accomplished, turned away with the final insult of an insufferably smug smirk and fell asleep.

Jessha slid over as far as possible from the sleeping figure and glared at it balefully, shaking with silent rage and reaction, tears seeping slowly down her face. There he lay, oblivious, and not even the waves of outraged hatred she was projecting in the Force disturbed his arrogant composure. He was too strong for anything she could do directly; he was her husband and whatever he did to enforce his marital rights, no one would say a word in her defense against him. She was helpless. Jessha felt a burning pressure against her diaphragm, as if she were about to explode from the force of her futile inward emotion trying to escape. She refused to be helpless! There must be something . . . Jessha shifted, gasping slightly from the pain of her bruises and the violation of Darth's vindictive clumsiness, and buried her hot face in the embroidered bedcurtains. She stuffed the cloth into her mouth to muffle the first convulsive sob, and she considered her revenge.

Darth slept on with a satisfied smile infuriatingly tenacious on his mouth.

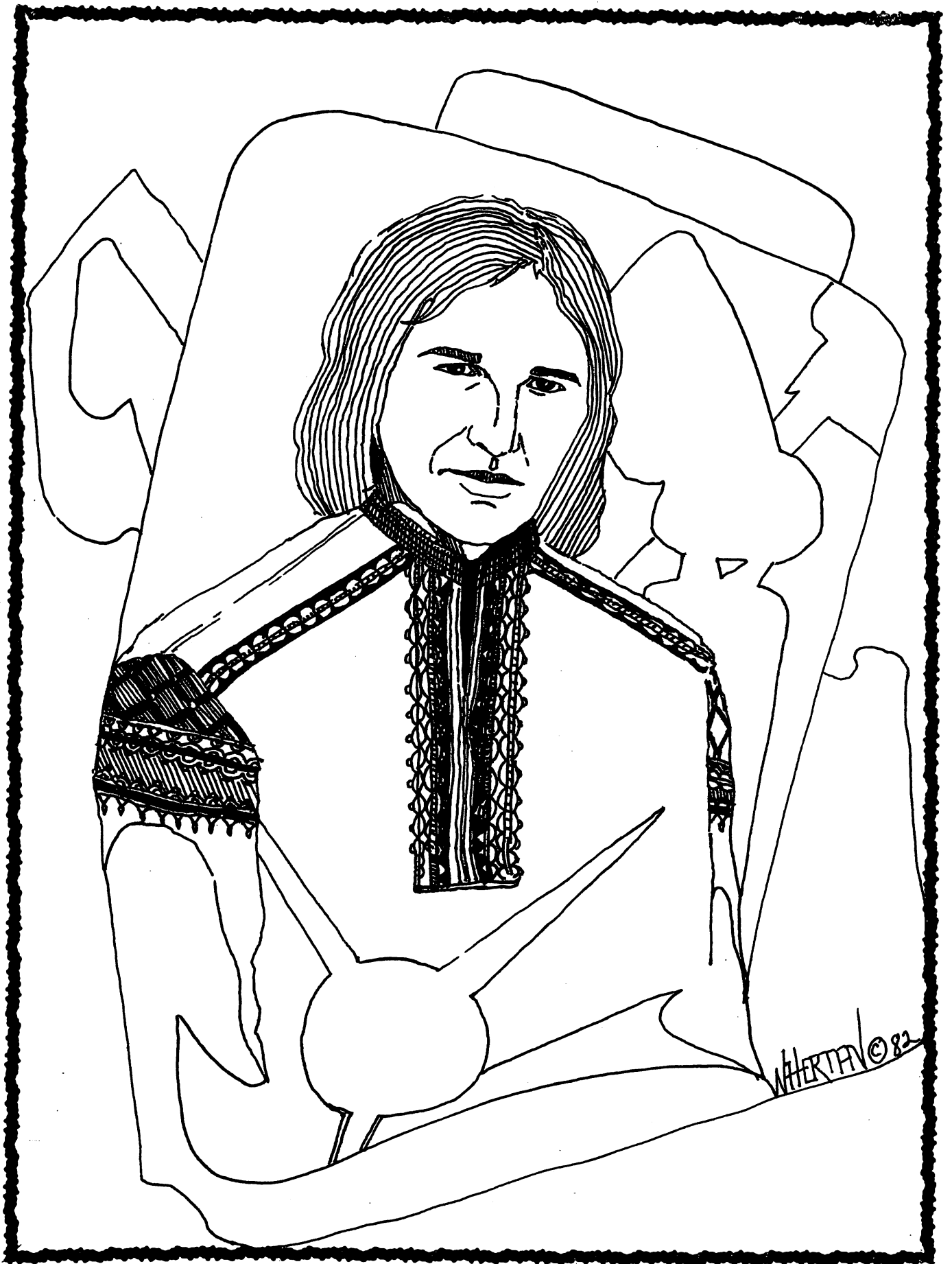


Within half a year Jessha was with child, and Walde was dead. The old Dark Lord surrendered at last to the devouring illness within him, in the assurance that the succession was secured for another generation, and slipped out of life as if with relief. Jessha watched the Court as it felt out the character of its new master, and she was reminded of her father's hunting pack testing a new leader.

Fawning bitches, Jessha thought, as she observed the eager court ladies who clustered around their handsome young lord. They pursued him with sideways glances over their fluttering fans, with melting smiles and downcast eyes and decorous blushes; with cooing speeches and deep, admiring sighs that displayed their charms to best advantage in low-cut fashionable gowns. Jessha despised them all. Free of his father's heavy hand, the young Dark Lord proved to be an apt and willing pupil, and if he had been inexperienced when he first came to his wife's marriage bed, he was, with the help of such enthusiastic instructors, ignorant no longer by the time Jessha was ready for her lying-in.

Jessha supposed, when she stopped to think about it, that she should be jealous, or, at least, that it was her duty to appear jealous in the properly lofty and indifferent way befitting a princess who was also a young bride. But all she could manage to feel was pleasure that her lord's attention was distracted from her, once she was safely pregnant.

There is nothing so public as the private life of princes. Gossip of ladies-in-waiting and gentlemen of the bedchamber soon confirmed the rumor, which swept from the scullery to the guardpost on the parapet, that there was no love lost between the Dark Lord and his lady. And, inevitably, there



was the question of who was to blame, adding fuel to the simmering conflict of the ruling and the cadet branches of the House of Vader; a minor matter, perhaps, in the great business of the government of Sith, but a straw in the wind for the wavering nobility.

So matters stood when the Dark Lord's cousin returned from Alderaan and the private life of princes became the stuff of public politics. Koric's intentions were obvious when he landed on his own estates rather than at the spaceport, bringing with him reports of several assassination attempts which had followed him to Alderaan, assassination attempts with the unmistakable signature of the old Dark Lord, and a battalion of Alderaani volunteers. At least they were officially volunteers, for the Alderaani government was not eager to be seen interfering in an independent system's internal struggle; it would not look good in the Senate. The volunteers were armed with suspiciously up-to-date blastrifles, and had a small but elegant selection of ordinance and ground support vehicles. In the months that followed, more of them trickled in until several thousand Alderaani waited on the edge of Koric's lands for the signal to move.

And waited. The Sith autumn rains came, turning the unpaved roads into impassable morasses of gluey mud, followed by the heavy snows of winter, and Pera'u, commander of the Alderaani force, discovered the realities of warfare in a feudal culture.

The Alderaani commander, baffled and angry, found that Koric's Sith troops and advisers flatly refused to budge during the cold season, flatly refused to do anything without the support of the skittish Sith nobility who led Koric a diplomatic dance all that winter, courteous and evasive, waiting for some definite move on the part of Duke Arlen, official liege lord of Koric's branch of the ruling family, or on the part of the young Dark Lord. But Duke Arlen still refused to commit himself to either his son or his nephew, and the Dark Lord, sitting in his fortified capital, engaged in his own diplomacies among the lords of Sith, called in his levies of men and materiel, and awaited the thaw. And the birth of his heir. Both came with spring.

Jessha lay in the huge state bed, her pale face shadowed by the hangings, half-hidden in the gloom of late afternoon. The modern medical droid hovering at her side was an incongruous element in this unchanging room where the Heirs of Sith had been begotten and come into the world for centuries, and the other inhabitants of the room seemed uneasy with it, ignoring it as much as possible. Rain beat dully against the leaded casements where Jessha's maid sat on the window seat, her head bent over her sewing, waiting.

Indrawn breath hissed between Jessha's teeth and her face twisted, but she made no other sound. Darth Vader looked up for a moment, then resumed his slow pacing. Jessha watched him, trying to use his movement as a focal point to take her mind off her pain and anticipation. Firelight sent alternating light and shadow, as he turned, across his cold, withdrawn features and the shoulder-length hair which glowed against the darkness of his cloak and the absolute black worn by the ruling Dark Lord of the Sith.

Jessha noted how much he had changed in these last months since the death of the old Lord. He was no longer a boy. His body was maturing, filling out and losing its adolescent gawkiness. The artistocratic bones of his face had broadened, taking on a cast of forceful maturity, a look of command, reflected in the new sensuality of his full mouth, his strong cheekbones, the emphatic slash of his heavy brows over dark, liquid eyes. The cold reserve remained in his expression, but the former wariness had been replaced by a look of confident authority. He moved with the assurance of a prince.

Jessha felt suffocated by the sense of power that surrounded him. "Beru," she called in a strained voice, and her maid put down her sewing and hurried to Jessha's side. Jessha took her hands and clutched them as another labor pain swept over her.

"Go ahead, my lady; cry out," Beru whispered. "It will make you feel better."

"No!" Jessha said through clenched teeth. She threw a black look in her husband's direction, but a minute later she gasped softly again, arching her back, pulling on Beru's hands.

Jessha flinched as the forgotten droid came forward and laid a sensor on her belly. It hummed to itself, then gave an abrupt whrrr and turned in the direction of the Dark Lord. "Your Highness, the child will be born within the hour."

"Good." Vader snapped his fingers at the page waiting by the door. "Call the witnesses."

"My Lord." The page bowed and hurried out.

Jessha lay back, breathing deeply in an effort to avoid undignified panting. She scowled at Vader, at the droid. Neither of them had spoken a word to her since her labor started, except for the droid's terse commands: "Breathe, bear down . . . " Jessha felt as if she were one of Vader's prize delwa mares giving birth. And now she would have to endure the humiliating Witnessing, the public birthing of the Heir which Sith custom demanded. She shrank from the idea of the highest nobility of Sith seeing her in this ludicrous state, in the grip of a biological process she could not control. Jessha made futile swimming motions with her hands, trying to straighten the bedclothes around her and put her bedgown into some sort of order. It just wasn't necessary any longer, she thought; no lord with any sensitivity would require the public birthing by his lady anymore. Jessha's own mother had borne seven children, and the Duke had been perfectly satisfied with holotape and voiceprint. But then, the Duke was a considerate man, and he loved his lady . . .

The droid monitored her once again, making satisfied mechanical chucklings to itself, and rolled back as Vader approached the bed. Jessha clutched at the sheet to cover herself as Beru backed away from her side. Wordlessly, Vader reached down and pulled away the sheet, in spite of Jessha's short, fierce struggle to hold on to it. He started to put his hand on her belly, and she twisted sharply onto her side.

"Stop it," Vader said calmly, pinning her effortlessly to the bed with one powerful hand. He looked at Jessha's face, sparing her no more than a brief, distracted half-frown, the same expression Jessha had seen when her husband was annoyed by an overeager hound or fractious mount at the hunt.

A wave of anger went through her. "Don't touch me!"

"I must join with my Heir's mind during the birth," Vader said. "I warn you, Lady; do not try to fight me."

"If I may be so bold, you Highness," said the deferential droid from behind Vader's shoulder, "I would suggest that the Princess might be more cooperative if you let me give her something to relieve the pain."

"No; no drugs. I must have the child alert."

Jessha pulled at her captive arm, only to stiffen again as the cramping agony wrenched her. This time, in spite of her best efforts, a faint groan escaped her before the pain ebbed and she relaxed limply.

"Don't fight me," Vader repeated, tightening his numbing grip. "This child is mine. My son. My Heir."

She caught Vader's aura as he entered the child's mind, his touch, for all his power, as delicate and precise as a surgeon's knife. Jessha surrendered and drew back, afraid she would hurt the baby if she opposed him further. She felt Vader's firm, feather-light control as he followed the child in its passage toward the outside world, sorting and opening the new mind layer by layer, reaching to the very center of the awakening consciousness, imprinting his identity on the unformed spirit and absorbing his son's identity in turn. He worked slowly, careful not to damage the fragile infant mind, bringing their Force-signatures into a compatible resonance, creating a lifelong bond between them.

It was no wonder that this technique was so seldom used, Jessha thought, and then only among the great lords and the strongest Force-sensitives. Only the need for an undisputed inheritance and the danger of an heir's disloyalty could justify the vulnerability this melding created between the two. Jessha watched her husband; he was absorbed, oblivious to her and everything around him. She realized what it must cost him to open himself so fully to another being, to accept the threat to his private integrity in the Force his unity with his son created. And yet it was no wonder either that he thought it necessary, Jessha decided, remembering the long, bloody history of Sith dynastic struggles, and her husband's relationship with his own father. Had Darth been imprinted himself? Surely yes; the old Lord had liked to keep a firm grip on everything that belonged to him. Jessha shuddered faintly. She was grateful her own father had rejected imprinting as a barbarous, old-fashioned custom.

Through a painful haze, Jessha heard the witnesses crowding into the bedroom. Vader released her and stepped back to allow the droid to finish the messy process of delivering the child. As soon as it was dry and clean, Vader accepted the baby from the droid and turned to face the group of nobles standing by the door. The sound of recording equipment came to Jessha over the other noise.

Vader held up the child, and Jessha could hear the ring of triumph in his voice. "Behold this child, the Heir of Sith. This is my son, and I so declare him before you all."

"So be it," the witnesses chorused.

"Pledge the Heir."

One by one the nobles came forward and knelt before the Dark Lord holding his son, repeating the traditional words of fealty. Lying forgotten by them all, on sheets still clammy with her sweat and blood, Jessha ignored the ministrations of the droid as it bustled around her, completing its mysterious medical procedures. She spared only a brief, wistful thought for the soft-voiced midwife whose gentle strength had brought Jessha and her brothers and sisters into the world. Jessha had asked for the midwife, but the old Lord had refused. Trust Walde, Jessha thought bitterly, to require one of the hated Empire's machines only when a human presence would have given her so much more comfort.

But Jessha had no more time to think about the dead Lord. She studied the witnesses pledging her child, noting with grim satisfaction that several of the traditional vassals were not present. A suspicious number had developed pressing business or convenient ill health in the last few weeks which prevented them from attending to await her lying-in. Some, she knew, were simply cautious, waiting for developments. But the others: how many, she wondered, might be persuaded to her brother's cause? She considered them: Valerens, Morlet, Hatha--they were old-line conservatives, committed to the traditional succession by the loyalty of their ancestors and by conviction. No hope there. Lanar, Kathalen; yes, they were trimmers, ready to support whomever was in power, but they were dangerous for that very reason. There was no depending on them, even with the most tempting of bribes. She had dangled hints of estates confiscated and reenfeoffed in private discussions with them over the last few weeks, but they had evaded definite pledges of support--or opposition. Jessha knew from her own spies no word of such conversations had been carried to her husband. But that meant no more than caution, Jessha knew. She turned her eyes to the last of the witnesses: Fforst of Granvaille, who controlled the important pass into the mountains between Koric's holdings and the plains. Perhaps; Jessha thought she had seen a flicker of communication when the lord glanced at her before pledging the heir. She could not be sure, but Granvaille was a valuable prize; if she--Jessha struggled toward a sitting position, forgetting everything else in her concentration. Then she felt the bleeding start again, felt the impersonal appendages of the droid on her shoulders. She flinched from the cool metal touch and sank back, cursing under her breath. It would be at least a week before she could plausibly receive visitors. That was the earliest she could schedule her churching without exciting comment that would surely make her husband suspicious. A whole week lost, at this critical time! She snarled to herself and lay back, considering.

She felt another touch, this one warm and human. "My Lady?" Beru whispered anxiously, taking Jessha's hand. The maid looked quickly over her shoulder toward the Dark Lord, then back at her mistress. Jessha was warmed by the concern on Beru's face, and closed her eyes as the maid began gently patting a damp cloth across Jessha's forehead.

"You!" Jessha's eyes snapped open again, as Beru jumped and dropped the cloth, then curtsied to the floor. "Yes, your Highness," Beru answered.

"Take my son," Vader said. "And look that you let no harm come to him."

Beru exchanged glances with her mistress; the threat in the Dark Lord's words was clear. Beru bristled. She took the child from Vader's hands with an obedient courtesy that was so perfect it was close to insolence, yet safe from any punishment. "Yes, your Highness," Beru repeated. She wrapped the child in a warmed blanket, crooning, "Shhh, shhh . . . softly, my little love; softly . . . hush, dear, now . . ."

Jessha smiled a little at the indignant edge in Beru's voice as she answered the Dark Lord. Dear Beru; as if she would neglect a helpless child, no matter whose son it was. She'll probably be more of a mother to him than I will, Jessha thought. She relaxed, leaving the matter of her son in Beru's competent hands, and turned her mind back to the problem of Granvaille.

Vader turned on his heel with a swirl of dark cloak and swept out of the room in a flourish, the crowd of nobility close behind him. Jessha watched him leave, the corners of her mouth curling up in a small moue of ironic disgust. Such a sense of the DRAMATIC, she thought; he has to make a grand exit. She heard the stamp of feet and the clash of ceremonial pikes outside the door as the Dark Lord's guard saluted him and fell into escort position, then the sound of Vader's voice as he strode off down the hall, his tone abrupt and commanding: "Derglli, Berej; attend me!"

Earl Marshal and Exchequer; that must mean--Jessha started to sit up again, then gasped as pain lanced through her.

Beru finished tucking the child into his cradle on the other side of the room and came over to her mistress. "He's a beautiful boy, my Lady; so strong and healthy. Now, just relax. Don't worry about a thing. I'll have a nice warm bath for you in a minute, then you can sleep . . ."

"Not now, Beru. There's no time," said Jessha absently, thinking hard. "Quick, go get Owen. Yes, yes--I must send word to my father about the child's birth; there will be no suspicion about that . . ."

"My Lady! You're all over blood!" Beru cried.

"Give me the coverlet. That will cover me well enough. Go on, Beru."

"My Lady!"

"Go, I said!" Jessha put all the force of her personality into that command. Beru looked at Jessha's determined expression, bit her lip, and did as she was told.

It seemed like half a day, but Jessha knew it was no more than twenty minutes before Beru returned with Owen, a round-faced man in his middle thirties, dressed in the green jerkin, full-sleeved shirt, and half-boots of Jessha's own guards. He came to the side of the bed, bowed deeply, then

pushed back his dark green hood and shook out his short brown hair. Jessha noticed his long cloak was dripping on the floor, soaked through. She looked up, becoming conscious of the open window against which Owen was silhouetted, where the afternoon was shading into evening. The grey stone towers of the keep were indistinct across the courtyard, veiled by the dull light and driving rain. The cool, damp scent of outside air came to Jessha, cutting through the cloying smell of blood and pain around her. She drank it in gratefully.

"Owen," Jessha smiled warmly at the sturdy guardsman, and extended her hand.

He went down on one knee and took it, touched his forehead to it. "How may I serve you, my Lady?"

"Owen, you must go to my brother at once--tonight. Tell my brother the child is born and my husband has imprinted him. The lords here have sworn to him, and now my husband will be ready to move." She paused and frowned, considering. "If I know my husband, he will be right on your heels. How close does it look to you from down there?"

"Close, my Lady. The men have been ready for a month and there's nothing left but the rest of the supplies that couldn't be loaded until the last. The commanders have been pushing everyone hard."

"What is my husband doing?"

"His Highness is still in conference with my lord of Erlich and the Earl Marshal . . ."

Jessha's eyes flashed. "You will not use that title! My brother is the Dark Lord, not Darth Vader!"

"Of course; of course, my Lady! Truly, it was just a habit, that. Forgive me. If I slip up and forget with the others--"

Jessha looked away, uneasy and confused, momentarily almost guilty. When she looked back to Owen, her tone was nearly pleading. "Owen, it is for the good of Sith. We must grow, must change. We can't fight the Empire with warriors on delwa-back and a feudal economy that has to use all its energy to feed its own people. If we don't modernize, the Empire will swallow us up. But my husband-- Owen, you do understand. . . ?"

The guardsman straightened, suddenly expressionless, as solid and oblivious as a block of wood. Jessha could read his disapproval clearly, and stopped her train of thought abruptly. No; she should not speak that way to Owen. The Larses had served her mother's House for nearly four hundred years; Owen would serve her--and her son--out of that obedient loyalty. It was an insult to him to talk of new weapons and economics, as if he were some politician, some wavering ally who must be persuaded to what was so clearly his duty. It impugned his honor. Jessha was instantly contrite. Her next words were as close to an apology as she could offer someone of his rank. "How long exactly do you think it will be?"

Owen's expression conveyed his gratitude and satisfaction; they were

back on good terms. "They should be ready to move out in two or three days at most, my Lady."

"Two or three days. . . . H'mm . . . " Jessha considered. "It's too bad I couldn't delay the birth any longer, but that should give my brother enough time. Do you think you might be able to take one of the flitters? You must tell them you are going to inform my father the Duke of the birth of his grandson."

"Yes, my Lady; I understand. I've already arranged it."

"Good man. Go then. And Owen--"

"Yes, my Lady?"

Jessha smiled at him. "Be careful. I can't afford to lose you."

"Yes, my Lady!" The guardsman flashed her a grin, thoroughly mollified, and bowed himself out.

Jessha listened to her guardsman's footsteps hurrying away and lay back down with a sigh. "You may draw my bath now, Beru," she murmured, and closed her eyes. She was suddenly utterly weary. In the darkness behind her eyelids, the noise of water was all around her, the sound of bath water nearby joining with the drumming rush and gurgle of the rain. Water, Jessha thought dreamily. Water . . . Everything flows, nothing is safe or sure and all things change. Even the House of Vader, that is so proud in its traditions. My brother, my father, my husband, and now my child, heir to all of them . . . and my loyal liege folk. Whoever wins in this struggle, the House will suffer. "The house and the blood which are holy. . . . Men die and women weep," she remembered the old poetry, "but while the kindred live . . . " Whichever of them won, kindred and loyal folk would die. Bloodguilt tore at her. But my son, the Heir, is the unity of the House again. Someday, he will rule. Unexpectedly, she felt an upsurge of love for the baby, quietly asleep in his cradle. Her last thought as she floated away into sleep was that determination. My son. Someday he WILL rule Sith. But until then I must protect him--from both of them. From all of them . . .

At the same time that the Dark Lord was discussing matters with his Earl Marshal, the Dark Lord's cousin was in conference with his council in his own stronghold. Pera'u paced back and forth, agitated, in front of the dark wooden trestle table where they sat watching him with carefully noncommittal expressions. The Alderaani was peripherally aware of the contrast between his rumpled dull green fatigues, the remains of a once-crisp Alderaani Irregulars uniform, and the furs and velvets of the arrogant Sith before him. Pera'u could almost feel their disdain and hostility toward a non-Sith and a commoner here in the council. Irritation roughened his voice, making him careless of his words.

"But, damn it, Koric--"



The men at the table shifted, and the guards at the door made a half-gesture of threat with their pikes. Pera'u checked himself and tried again. "Your Grace--Highness--" Yes, that was it, the proper address. "You must see that this is necessary. Our only real advantage is technological superiority; your cousin has numerical superiority and the defensive position. But a few tons of herbicide sprayed over enemy territory will wipe out the entire crop. There'll be no way your cousin can field an army without food supplies. And the effect will dissipate by the next planting season, by the time you occupy the area. It's only a short-term poison. If we can defeat your cousin without any major damage to property, you won't have to worry about rebuilding--"

"It would mean famine . . . " Koric said slowly.

"Yes, of course. That's the idea."

"I have never made war on peasants," said the Prince.

There was a rumble of assent from around the table. The expressions were openly hostile now, and Pera'u found himself glaring back. Somehow his purpose in coming here had gone seriously awry, he thought in frustration. The enlightened young prince who had talked so enthusiastically about liberating his people from the shackles of tradition in his dorm room at the University was hardly visible in the Sith lord who sat listening to him. If these supporters are the progressive nobility, Pera'u thought bitterly, I'd hate to see the reactionary ones. They were hopelessly undisciplined and individualistic; they all saw war as some kind of tournament, a test of personal courage, not an exercise in rational military strategy. They all demanded that they be allowed to go dashing into the fighting at the head of their personal levies, like a bunch of bloody idiots, asking to get themselves killed. No thought of reserves; no thought of tactics . . . How could he organize any sort of a campaign?

I have never made war on peasants. . . . Pera'u was even more disgusted with the unruly mob of conscript serfs who masqueraded as his "infantry." Somehow the peasants, too, had been much more attractive back on Alderaan. Pera'u thought of the dull-eyed, anonymous figures in their shapeless foot-wrappings stuffed with straw and their greasy clothes that smelled of their herd beasts. They all wanted to be home taking care of their fields and their animals; none of them seemed to care at all about fighting for their own freedom. Pera'u had never believed in the theory that natural slaves existed before coming to Sith, but now he was beginning to wonder about it. He hardly cared what happened to them any more.

Baron Lanore was rising to speak. The burly lord had flowing ginger-colored hair and a bushy beard that merged with the heavy fur revers of his surcoat; he reminded Pera'u of a wookiee: large, furry, and dangerous. The baron scowled at Pera'u. "By your leave, Highness, I have no liking for this coward's-trick. Would you shame yourself and the lord your cousin, as if--" He stopped abruptly, evidently constrained by courtesy. Pera'u saw shock on the faces of the other lords and a faint tinge of angry color in Koric's face. What was that about? he wondered. He could never quite get used to the casual presence of Force-use among these strange people. Half the time Pera'u felt as if he were blind or dumb among them and that they pitied--or despised--him for it. It made him edgy and defensive. Such things should be decently hidden away among the Jedi, Pera'u thought, wishing he were back in the civilized territories of the Empire, not trapped on this primitive world of bloodthirsty sorcerers . . .

"Your pardon, Highness," the Baron said; "I had no inten--"

Again there was that sense of some communication that was closed to Pera'u, unsatisfactory and irritating. The baron gave Pera'u a long, level look, plainly a challenge. Swords were forbidden in council, but the baron's hand was on the hilt of his dagger, and even Pera'u, Force-blind, had no difficulty reading the meaning of that gesture, as the baron stared pointedly at Pera'u's empty belt. No one, lord or commoner, except a criminal or a coward beneath shame, went unarmed on the Sith Worlds.

"You forget yourself, Lanore," Koric said coldly, and the baron sank back into his chair, still glaring at Pera'u.

There was a deferential throat-clearing. The council turned to a thin old man at the end of the table. Count Arvat of Lynne, Pera'u identified him. "Truly, your Highness," the man said, "these serfs have offered us no injury, and they have no such weapons as this outworlder would use against them. There can be no equal combat. Even serfs--" he faltered.

"Yes," said Koric. Pera'u knew, though he did not understand it, that the prince was thinking of the ancient Sith code of personal combat which taught that it was dishonorable to fight anyone without an equal chance of defense. But that is for the silly duels these hotheaded nobles fight among themselves all the time, Pera'u thought; how can that apply to real warfare? This is serious!

"Your Highness," Pera'u said, "it isn't a question of cowardice, or, if

you'll pardon me, sir, some abstract Sith code of honor. It's a question of what's most efficient, militarily speaking. By sacrificing a few lives--enemy lives--now, you'll save many more lives, including your own troops', in the long run. It's the only way to avoid a long, drawn-out campaign. We can't afford that."

No, we can't," Koric said slowly. "But I do not want to begin my reign with an act of tyranny."

"Highness," Arvat interjected, "the Bright Lord will not favor the lord who acts unjustly against the poor folk who have no defender." He was obviously quoting.

Pera'u gave an inarticulate snarl of exasperation. "The important thing is to win, my lords! If you lose this war, you won't have anything to rule over anyway. Excuse my bluntness, your Highness, but you can worry about the niceties of religion and morality later. The important thing is that if the people of Sith are ever going to gain the place they deserve among the worlds of the galaxy, your cousin has got to be removed from the throne. That goal is too important for you to be squeamish about the necessary methods. We have an effective weapon. Let's use it."

There was a babble of protest from around the table, but Koric looked up, fixing his council with a stony stare, and the voices subsided. The prince looked down again and sat silently for a long moment, turning his signet ring absently around his finger, frowning. "Pera'u is right," he said at last. "For the good of Sith, my cousin must be defeated. We must do what is necessary." Before anyone could respond, he added firmly, "Thank you, my lords. You may go."

It was dismissal. The lords rose and bowed themselves out of the room. Pera'u moved to follow them, but Koric stopped him. When they were alone, Koric rose and walked restlessly around the room. He halted, staring at the Arms of Sith, silver fret on sable, embroidered on the cloth of estate behind his presence-chair. He sounded as if he were talking to himself. "This isn't what I wanted. This isn't what I intended."

"I know," said Pera'u. "It isn't what I intended either."

"I began this for the sake of the commons, not to slaughter helpless serfs. That's what it will mean if I authorize this plan of yours." He turned to Pera'u. "I don't mind fighting, any more than Darth does. Not even the killing. By the Bright Lord, Pera'u, I'm a prince of Sith! I've been studying swordsmanship since I was old enough to hold a weapon; I've been leading my father's troops since I was fifteen. I'm not afraid of steel. I'm no coward."

"No, of course not, Koric. That remark of Lanore's was meant for me, not you."

"Truly. If I thought otherwise, I'd have his head off, and he knows it," said Koric in a matter-of-fact tone. Pera'u shivered. Koric was a prince of Sith.

"Still, I don't like this," the prince continued. "I wish there were some other way."

"I know," Pera'u repeated. "But there isn't any other way, not one that won't cost many more lives, your own people's lives too."

"But they are my people. I am the true Dark Lord; they are my liege folk."

Pera'u heard the shrill edge in Koric's voice and saw the slight shifting of his glance. So Koric was not as certain of that as he seemed, Pera'u thought. He was, to all appearances, doing a good job of convincing himself; perhaps soon he will succeed completely. But not yet. Pera'u considered the best way to accelerate the process. He needed Koric, needed Koric's complete commitment to this . . . what? Pera'u sifted through the possible words to describe what they were embarked upon, overcome by a sudden cynicism. Treason? Civil war? Rebellion? Revolution? Crusade for freedom and justice? Whatever he called it, Pera'u knew, it was necessary. All of it was necessary. The Sith must be brought into the modern galaxy, for all her people's sake.

Poor man, Pera'u thought as he watched Koric turning his signet ring around his finger again in an old gesture of unease Pera'u remembered from Koric's days at the university. Poor man: he has guilt enough about what he is doing. Why do I have to lay more on him? He quailed inwardly at the torture in Koric's eyes.

"Koric, innocents die in every war," Pera'u said. "You should know that. You're a ruler."

"Yes; I know that." Koric was almost whispering. He stood for a long moment with his head lowered, silent. At last he looked up and Pera'u saw the new bleak determination on Koric's face. "Darth's policies would destroy us. I will rule Sith. I will do whatever I must."

Pera'u felt no pleasure in having carried his point, only a remote sadness. It had to be done, but still it hurt him to watch the bright idealism with which Koric had begun fading, lost in practical realities. Koric was losing something of himself, Pera'u realized, something he could never regain, something he would regret losing forever. A vagrant line from an old poem floated through Pera'u's mind: " . . . never bright, confident morning again. . . . "

"Koric, I--" he began.

His words died at the glare Koric turned on him, an expression close to hatred. "You have my authorization. Proceed. Carry out your plan."

"Yes, your Highness," Pera'u answered, startled. He opened his mouth to continue, but the prince forestalled him with a sharp gesture.

"You have leave to go."

Koric's tone left no room for further argument or comment. Pera'u

sketched a clumsy bow and left. His last impression, before the door shut behind him, was of Koric, with a look of desolation on his face, standing in front of his cloth of estate, a small, lonely figure dwarfed by the ceiling-high banner bearing the symbol of his lordship.

So war was joined between the Dark Lord Vader and his cousin, a slow-moving and frustrating war to the Alderaani. Pera'u's flitters and ground weapons struck into enemy territory, inflicting damage to strongholds and keeps, but the Alderaani's few thousand men were helpless to hold the land, and the enemy faded away in front of them, refusing contact. The peasantry refused to face the strange weapons out of fear, and the nobility out of contempt for the machines that killed at a distance and the alien common folk who used them.

Koric's own men came behind the Alderaani on foot and delwa-back, struggling through the steaming mud of the spring thaw and on into the choking dust of the short summer dry season, over unpaved roads, across the fresh-plowed fields that refused, this year, to show the green of sprouting plants. The Dark Lord's men met them here, and the campaign wavered back and forth in a series of indecisive battles. After his first few attempts, Pera'u gave up trying to force the shapeless melees into any semblance of rational or coordinated tactical structure, and accepted the Sith concept of battle as a collection of individual combats. It was all he could do to keep his own homesick volunteers in order.

As the year advanced, it became clear to the people whose fields had become the battleground that they would reap no crop this season. Koric's troops were hungry enough, with a supply line that stretched across hundreds of miles. War was nothing new anywhere in this ancient feudal land, and the local folk were adept at hiding their grain and livestock from enemy soldiers searching for food; searching boldly, led by a noble on delwa-back who came demanding tribute in the name of the Dark Lord, or furtively, in small groups on foot--stragglers, scouts, camp followers; and, as the campaign grew longer, deserters. Pera'u's Alderaani flitters and transports kept Koric's troops precariously supplied from home. Neither his cousin's troops nor his cousin's people were so lucky. The troops pressed the peasantry harder and harder for their fading reserves; and the peasantry, as they had forever, endured as best they could.

Pera'u watched Koric growing daily more grim, more silent, more preoccupied, as his soldiers advanced against the Dark Lord's weakening resistance over a land as barren as the surface of the planet's two tiny, airless moons. Sullen knots of peasantry lined the streets as Koric's troops marched through towns and manors along their route. Pera'u could read Koric's growing pain and guilt in the set of his mouth, the mounting greyness of his face, as Koric saw them and turned away from the starveling women, the hopeless, clutching hands and thin cries of the children, and the dull stares of men already too weak to walk who leaned against their doorways to watch them pass.

It all merged together in Pera'u's mind, a faceless procession of misery, fatigue, and sameness. He remembered the campaign as a series of

disjointed frozen moments, like something seen by flashes of lightning. He was surprised, later, that he recalled so little of the actual fighting. In an age of holovision, no young officer had to go into battle unprepared, as the officers of other armies had done, to meet the realities of blood and death for the first time on the battlefield. The holos Pera'u had seen in his training were of clean modern death--explosions, laserbeams, blasterfire--not this crude hacking with swords and pikes. Yet, somehow, he was prepared even for that. It was the other things, the other horrors, that remained in his memory.

The moment when Pera'u finally realized he had lost control of the situation completely came toward the end of the summer. Koric's army was preparing to bivouac at the foot of a small rise not far from a nameless (to Pera'u) town very like all the other nameless towns they had marched by in the last few months. The late-afternoon sky was dark toward the west with heavy cloud banks, forerunners of those which would soon bring the autumn rains again. Futile heat-lightning crackled against the horizon in the heavy, still air; there would be no rain yet. Pera'u felt oppressed by the breathless air that was as solid as water in his tired lungs as he inhaled. Koric and his staff had climbed the ridge to try and catch a glimpse of the main body of the Dark Lord's delwa troops, his noble cavalry, that they had been pressing now for nearly a tenday. Pera'u expected the enemy would turn and make a stand at Manric, a day or two further. The Dark Lord could hardly allow them to come much closer to his major stronghold at Lliryanthi without some defense, even though his troops were already suffering seriously from lack of food and fodder for the delwas. Many of the animals, Pera'u knew, had died. His following troops had found no bodies. Delwas were edible--barely. There had been no human bodies either, Pera'u realized, and his mind skittered nervously away from the possible significance of that. Cannibalism? he wondered, and shuddered.

The Alderaani looked back down the rise toward the multicolor blot of the encampment against the dull-brown earth. That earth haunted Pera'u: a dreary, dead sameness which should have been bright with the ripening crops ready for harvest. Instead it lay blasted, stricken, empty of any except foreign life.

A faint sound caught Pera'u's attention. A disorderly group of people, perhaps some twenty or thirty, was climbing up the incline toward them from the direction of the town. A few carried hoes, scythes, implements Pera'u did not recognize, but most were empty-handed. Koric gestured toward his guard, and the armsmen gathered around their lord as Pera'u's Alderaani security lowered their blastrifles.

The peasants came to a straggling halt, shifting uneasily. Pera'u studied them. The clothes they were wearing were clean and substantial, but they hung on the skeletal figures, and there was a hollow air of desperation about them.

An older man detached himself from the group. "Please, my lord . . . "

Koric threw back his cloak, displaying his black tunic and breeches, the massive gold chain across his shoulders. His armsman took a step forward, hand on sword-hilt.

The spokesman swallowed, then reluctantly went down on one knee, followed by the rest of the peasantry in a ragged series. These men were clearly loyal to their own lord, and only the worst need could have forced them to acknowledge Koric with the symbols of deference due their lawful sovereign.

"Highness," the spokesman said, as if it were bitter in his mouth. "Highness, of your charity, give us food."

"I have none to spare," said Koric.

A mutter swept over the crowd. "Highness," the spokesman pleaded, "just a little. Our children are starving. The land is sick and will not yield. If you do not help us, we will die. Gracious lord--"

"I have nothing for you," Koric replied in a curiously flat voice.

The spokesman slowly rose, staring dumbly at Koric and his bodyguard. The crowd moved restlessly. Helpless flotsam, Pera'u thought; bits of driftwood washed up on the beach, caught in the backwash of this horrible war. He turned his head aside, ashamed.

There was a sudden desperate stirring as the crowd surged to its feet, and a young man in the rear cried out, "They have food. If we have their lord . . . " A shudder went through the crowd. "Come on!" the young man shouted, and started forward. With a mindless, hopeless, animal cry, the little knot of people surged forward toward Koric. In reflex, the Alderaani blastrifles crashed and there were bodies on the ground. The mob wavered, then broke, and dissolved into individuals, running back down the slope toward the town.

Pera'u turned sympathetically toward Koric. "That was most unfortunate, your Highness. I know . . . " His sentence dribbled away into nothing. Koric was paying no attention to him, was staring fixedly at the young man who had led the mob toward him, as the young man twitched, crying out painfully from the blasterbolt, then gradually grew still. His face was like stone. "Highness?" Pera'u ventured uncertainly. "Koric?"

Koric spoke to his Sith armsman. "Fire the village. Kill them all." His voice was totally expressionless. The armsman, impassive, bowed and nodded to one of the lower-ranking aides, who set off at a trot toward the encampment, evidently to gather a squad to carry out the order.

"Koric! You can't--" Pera'u burst out.

"Be silent, Alderaani," said Koric. "They threatened violence to the Dark Lord. They must die. Everyone must die who threatens me." Then, in a calm voice, like a child reciting a lesson, "It is necessary. You told me so."

Pera'u stared at him in horror. Something human was gone out of his face, and it was blank and empty, suddenly alien. Behind the flat blue eyes flickered a new, tiny flame of madness.



Pera'u didn't quite dare to touch him; in this strange, new state he was afraid Koric would see it as another threat, but the Alderaani stepped a little closer and said urgently, softly, "Koric, you can't kill the whole village. They're not all guilty. They're harmless peasants. They're no threat to you."

"Not guilty," Koric murmured in a distant sing-song, as if he were talking to himself. He did not look at Pera'u. "Not guilty," he repeated, with a little laugh that chilled Pera'u completely through. "No, none of them were guilty, the peasants. Women. Little ones. But I killed them--all of them. What's a few more?" He turned a cheerful smile on Pera'u. "Why not kill them all? We're going to do it, you know. They'll all die anyway. Starved. Why not kill them all now? What difference does it make?"

Pera'u recoiled.

"Guilty. Guilty, guilty, guilty," Koric went on in that dreadfully cheerful tone. "No one is guilty. We'll kill them all, and then no one will be guilty, no one at all, not anymore. Come along, Pera'u. Let's go." He headed briskly down the slope toward the encampment, and his staff followed him.



In this fortress of Lliryanthi, the Dark Lord Vader waited for his cousin's final assault, and brooded. They were all gathered here, his remaining men, his wife, his heir, in this, his only safe stronghold, waiting for the last chance, the last desperate battle. Vader had no illusions that he could win it, but no one would be able to say he had surrendered. None of the songs which would recall this episode in the endless series of battles and deaths, the long-forgotten causes remembered only in the gallantry of their supporters, the ballads which were the history of the Sith's non-literate culture, would brand Darth Vader a coward. That, he thought, was worth a few deaths. Weary, sick, and starved, his men would fight on until the end, for their honor and his, and he would fight with them.

It might yet be his death as well, for in battle there was always that chance. No common Sith would touch a member of his, Vader's, House, but there were nobility also among Koric's followers who would fight him. Vader flexed his sword-hand, considering. He did not think there were many of Koric's men noble or no, who had the nerve and the skill to face him in battle and win; none, perhaps, except his cousin himself, who was an excellent swordsman, the Dark Lord knew. An excellent swordsman, but . . . tenderhearted. If Koric wanted him dead, Vader thought with contempt, Koric would have to take him himself, and Vader did not think Koric had the stomach for it, to kill his own kin. He, Darth Vader, would not be so squeamish if the situation were reversed, but Koric had always been a softheaded fool. In any case, there was nothing more he could do. The defenses of Lliryanthi, poor as they were, were prepared, and all he could do was wait. With a mental shrug, the Dark Lord decided it was time for a diversion, one of the few still available to him. He would go and visit his son.

He acknowledged the stamp-and-present-arms of the ceremonial guard at his door as he stepped out into the hallway. Not so ceremonial now, he reflected grimly. These men, too, would be in the fight before the end. He noted the two who fell in to guard him through the passageways of the fortress, recognizing one as Seller, feeling satisfied by his presence. Seller--tall, massive, silent, and efficient--was a familiar and gratifying satellite, a reassuring man to have at his back. Vader had no doubts about Seller's competence, or his loyalty.

They arrived at the door of the Heir's nursery, and Vader stepped through the door alone to confront his son's nurse Beru. As usual, his reaction to the woman was a combination of amusement and irritation. She obviously hated him, although Vader had never been sure why, and he could

read her deep suspicions about him as clearly in the rigidity of her shoulders and her controlled voice as in her aura. Vader could tell Beru was convinced he had some nefarious purpose in visiting the child, some scheme to work esoteric evil magic on him in the Force. Vader smiled to himself; that was just as well. Let the idiot believe it and it was all to the good--let her assume it was part of the Heir's training. It would do his dignity no good whatever for his people to know he came to see his son for the sheer pleasure of it.

"Leave me," Vader said. Beru obeyed, pointedly dropping an impeccable and elaborate court curtsy as she exited.

As the sound of his father's voice, the young Heir looked up from the pile of bright-colored blocks he was stacking, and a smile spread across his face as he struggled to unsteady bare feet. With a crow of delight, he flung himself in Vader's direction. Vader felt his son's aura, bright, untainted, happy now in his father's presence, and felt his own aura joining with his son's in the unique bond they had formed at the child's birth. Here was the one being in the world who was wholly his, who felt no fear, no hatred, no ambition, no obligation of duty; whose love for him was simple and wholehearted. Vader let his son's identity wash over him, merge with his, in harmony, soothing, cleansing, refreshing. He felt calm and at peace, as he did nowhere else.

"Son," he said simply, "come here." The sturdy little body hurtled into him, and heedless of his dignity, the Dark Lord of the Sith went down to his knees to hold his child. Vader examined the boy anxiously. Yes, he looked well and content. No matter how hungry the rest of the garrison, Vader's son would have enough to eat. He laid his cheek against the boy's head, feeling the feathery blond hair warm against him, smelling the clean baby-smell, as he luxuriated in the child.

He picked up the boy, carried him to a chair, and sat with him as the baby explored the fascinating attachments that were a part of this large, warm, comfortable, and interesting visitor: the gold chain around his neck, the bright buttons down his jerkin, his belt--the child's hand closed over the hilt of his father's dagger. He tugged at it.

Vader drew it out, carefully guarding the small inquisitive fingers from the edge. It was an exquisite piece of workmanship, decorated with the luthra-hawk along the blade and hilt, but well-worn with hard use and practice. The baby stared at it in total concentration, then tried again to touch the shiny metal. Vader fended him off, withdrew the dagger, and slipped it back into the sheath. The boy's face puckered as he tried to recapture the blade and was prevented by Vader's intervening fingers.

"Ah," said the Dark Lord joking. "A true Vader--a fighter from the beginning!" He sobered. "But you will have time enough for blades, my son; and need enough for them, too. Especially . . ." He checked himself. He would not bring thoughts of the coming battle here. The child's seeking hand closed over Vader's finger, examining the heavy signet ring, distracted successfully from the blade by this new interest. At the touch, Vader felt a wave of protectiveness, and a determination that nothing would be allowed to harm his Heir.

Heir to what? Vader thought bitterly, with Koric all but storming the gates of Lliryanthi. For a moment, memories of the hard campaign threatened to overcome him, then, with his son's fingers wrapped around his own, Vader set aside the thought. The arrogant pride of his House stirred in him: Vader conquered or died; Vader did not surrender, and he was Dark Lord. His son would be Dark Lord after him, even yet.

Koric would not dare to kill his sister's son, Vader thought ironically. The Dark Lord was aware by now that his wife was her brother's ally, and she had been closely watched since he had discovered this. A number of wavering or disloyal vassals of his had suffered fates of varying degrees of severity and unpleasantness when their correspondence with his wife had been intercepted; his father's example had served Darth Vader well. The child would survive, Vader had no doubt, but if he were to rule also someday, Vader must defeat Koric; Koric with his outland troops and his coward's machines that killed at a distance and sickened the very earth. What hope had he against them?

Vader put down his son, stood, and began pacing back and forth in the center of the room. Suddenly his mind was working at top speed. Perhaps it was time to use his father's example again, to turn to indirection and subtlety rather than the straightforward heroism of the sagas which was his natural preference. Not every strategic withdrawal was a surrender, to be sure, and if he were to counterattack, he would need time and allies. Allies. Yes! If Koric could make use of the Empire . . . Vader thought. And he, Vader, would not be content with a half-hearted collection of second-rate machinery and a few thousand troops from Alderaan; he would not be content to act as servant, soon to be slave, of a foreign government and Imperial ways. But use the Empire he, Vader, could also, and much more effectively than his cousin.

The key was the Jedi. Whoever sat on the Imperial throne, the Jedi ruled the Empire in fact . . . all the Empire. Whoever controlled the Jedi, controlled the Empire. With the power of the Empire behind him, he could destroy Koric, and General Master Kenobi wanted him as one of his Jedi. Vader allowed the strong pull toward the Jedi, which he had sternly suppressed since his crowning, to surface, and felt again his deep longing for the Jedi and the control of the Force. Let his cousin play with machines and Alderaani volunteers; all material power was insignificant next to the power of the Force, so General Kenobi had said.

For a moment, he was touched by a faint unease. "The Jedi are no one's allies. They will be masters or nothing." His father's words came back to him as he stood there. Then his head lifted proudly: I am Vader, he thought; I am master. Wherever I am, I rule, even over Jedi. I will be no such poor fool as Koric. I will make them serve MY purposes, and I will keep the Sith safe: safe for me, for my Heir, and for all the people of Sith.

He almost laughed out loud. It was so simple; why had he not seen it before? He picked up his son, tossed him into the air to the boy's delighted shouts, then put him down. He sobered, his eyes on the tiny boy clinging trustfully to his leg, and he slowly went down on one knee to hold him again. Slowly, almost reluctantly, Vader raised his hand and signed his

child with the symbol of the Bright Lord in a father's blessing. Darth Vader had never been more than conventionally religious, as befitted the heir to the ruling house, unlike his dead father. But somehow, in this moment, the dreadful vulnerability of this, his own small Heir, struck home to him, and he felt the hopeless impulse to protect and defend the child, to offer whatever he could to shield him from the dangers he would face when his father was no longer with him. A primeval terror swept through Vader, like a gulf opening under his feet, and he held the child close to him, so hard the boy began to struggle and cry. Irrationally, Vader wanted to pick up the boy, flee with him this instant, refuse to let the child out of his hands. Then control reasserted itself. It was impossible to think of traveling incognito across his lands, filled with desperate starving peasantry and enemy soldiers, with a baby hardly two years old.

"I wish I could take you with me," Vader murmured, "but it's much too dangerous. You will be safer here." His expression hardened. "And I swear, I swear, I will return for you. No one will steal your inheritance; when I return you will rule with me as Heir of Sith, as father and son."

Vader straightened to his feet, his mind busy now with practical details. Vader did not surrender. The last act of the farce must be played out, for his cousin would not believe he would give up the fortress without a fight to the end, and his retainers must cover his tracks. Under cover of the final preparation, he and one or two of his men should be able to get away on the last of the delwas, to make their way to the spaceport and offplanet. Surely that was the last place his cousin would think to look for him--on an Imperial ship. By the time Koric discovered he was not in Lliryanthi, Vader would be off the Sith Worlds, out of their jurisdiction, where Koric could not touch him.

One or two of his men . . . Vader was far too visible; someone else must make the preparation for his escape, someone both trustworthy and competent, a good fighting man and one with the intelligence to play a part. Vader ran over the members of his meiny in his mind, and settled with certainty on the one patiently guarding his door. Seller. The man was one of his best warriors: he was able, utterly loyal--and not inclined to be talkative. Yes, Seller would be perfect. Vader turned toward the door to inform Seller of his new role, and to give the orders for the final defense of Lliryanthi.

When he discovered the ruse, a tenday later, Koric was understandably furious. Had he been there to see it, Vader might well have been gratified at the depths of his cousin's anger. Koric stormed through the private solar of his sister's apartments at Lliryanthi, pacing back and forth in a gesture oddly, and for his sister, disconcertingly, like his vanished cousin Vader, as Koric addressed the only other occupant of the room.

"How could you do it--let him get away without sending so much as a word to let me know. I'm disappointed in you, Jessha!"

Jessha sat rigidly upright with her hands clasped in her lap where she could keep track of them, and contemplated a bright autumn leaf floating

down past the solar window with every appearance of innocent unconcern. It was a pose she had mastered quite well over the years since her marriage, a pose useful in uncertain situations. This, Jessha decided, was definitely an uncertain situation. This person in the room with her was not at all the brother she remembered; she was not sure who, or what, he was. He was older, a bit taller, subtly different in his movements, but the most important difference was his eyes: the strangely flat eyes without any of the sparkle and depth she remembered, eyes that looked as if they were backed by smoked glass, reflecting mirrors cutting off all contact with the mind behind them. She could not tell at all what lay in back of those eyes now.

What could have caused the change? Jessha cast about hopelessly for an explanation and found none. It could not have been his experiences on the battlefield--he had led troops before; she had seen him back from a skirmish against bandits or a treacherous liegeman of their father's, full of high spirits and stories of the fighting. The death of his wife in childbirth this three summers past? But Koric had hardly known his wife, and the baby had been born, and died, while he was on Alderaan. It could hardly have been his wife.

Their father? Yes, perhaps it was the death of Duke Arlen that had caused this change. She knew no more about it than the reports she had received. A hunting accident. After Koric had returned and their father had refused to see him, rumor had it that the Duke had begun to drink heavily. He had missed a jump, a difficult jump, a jump he should never have tried to take drunk, and had died in the fall, breaking his back on a fallen tree. Jessha knew that jump: a harmless-looking little stream with a deceitful tangle of boggy ground and deadfall on the other side, and in early spring it would be covered with patches of snow and dead leaves that hid a hundred places for a delwa to stumble. Jessha felt again the sorrow and the bitter anger that her husband had not even allowed her the chance to attend the Duke's funeral, lest she escape to her husband's enemies. As if, by then, she had even had any useful information to communicate, with Darth's spies always watching her! That she had not even been allowed a last look at her father, the father she had loved so dearly, before they buried him. But, at least, Jessha reminded herself as she had so many unsatisfying times before, the Duke had died as he would have wished: quickly and in the middle of the hunting he had enjoyed more than anything else, not slowly and painfully in a bed. And it had been, so they told her, a beautiful spring day full of sunshine. No snow; at least it had not been snowing . . .

Jessha studied Koric again. No, she did not think that even their father's death could have had this effect on Koric. Jessha brought her mind back to her present concern. She willed calmness, control, through her body, to the tips of the fingers in her lap, the toes neatly together beneath her skirts, into her shielded mind, into her voice. There was no hint of fear or apology as she answered, "I had no part in it, Koric. I was strictly watched; I would have been in the dungeons if Darth thought he could have kept me there. Even if I had known about his plans, there was no way I could have gotten word to you after he suspected me."

She could tell this did not satisfy him. He paced back and forth with

quick, frowning glances at her, then away. Finally, apparently irrelevantly, he said, "You gave him a son."

Jessha recognized the connection. How can I trust you? How can I trust anyone? she read in his face. Rumor had it that he slept badly, and she noticed how he flinched away from shadows, seemed to be constantly pursued by . . . by something. What it was, Jessha could not read exactly, but it seemed to her as if he were afraid of some betrayal, some threat. Yet frequently Jessha felt it was not so much fear she saw in Koric as expectation, as if her brother were waiting for some justified and anticipated retribution to fall upon him, and anyone near him might prove to be the agent of it. And so, perhaps, he distrusted them all. He was harder than she remembered him, more decisive, more royal in his commands. But he seemed not so much matured to her as, well, curdled, soured. She could see nothing of the openness and idealism in him now that she remembered from their childhood together.

"I assure you, Koric," Jessha said with a flash of her old ironic humor, "that was entirely his idea as well." She adjusted her silver underskirt to lie more gracefully over her small feet, running one forefinger idly over the brocaded pattern of the cloth.

"But Darth's brat . . . " Koric went on as if he had not heard her.

"My son," Jessha interrupted.

Koric stopped pacing to stare at her.

"He is my son as much as Darth's," Jessha repeated calmly. She looked up at him, calculating. "And your hostage. Or did you think of that? He is Darth's Heir, the most precious thing in the universe to him. I know. While you have his Heir, Darth won't dare do anything to threaten you, to put his son in danger." Jessha hoped she was right in that opinion. "Your best weapon against Darth, now, is to keep his son safe and well and--available."

Koric appeared to have followed this with some difficulty. "Yes . . . yes." he murmured after a while. He seemed to be more convinced by the assurance in Jessha's tone than the logic of her argument, but at least he was agreeing, Jessha was relieved to note. She turned quickly to another subject, casting about for some topic to distract him from any further suspicious speculations on her concern for his enemy's--as well as her--son. A question about the opposition of one of the councilors in council that morning successfully diverted his attention. Jessha listened with half an ear, interjecting small noises to indicate interest and agreement at appropriate intervals, thinking busily. Yes, she had planted the idea that Koric must defend her son. If she could continue to encourage him to think so, her son might survive. Jessha moved surreptitiously to blot the trickle of cold sweat running down her back into her shift. She had won. Her son was safe, at least for the time being.

As long as Darth Vader remained alive and away from the Sith.

Ah, Darth, she thought to herself, you are so MUCH more useful to me away from Sith than you ever were while you were here! She smiled a little.

Ruwenjorin

The Dark Lord and his little party emerged from the orbital shuttle and found themselves at last on the surface--if not the soil--of Malioke, capital world of the Empire. The enclosed walkways of the terminal were undecorated, extruded-plasteel panels of bland beige covered with a random geometric design intended to be equally inoffensive to all known sentient life forms. Nevertheless, Vader felt an undefined sense of unease creeping into his mind as he strode determinedly onward, ignoring the crowd of alien beings hurrying through the building. Part of the sensation came from the two honor guards flanking him to the rear, their nerves on edge from trying to watch the mass of beings for any hostile move in his direction. Vader could feel their auras, tense, worried. How can we even tell what to watch for? Seller was thinking; in this mob of aliens, ANYTHING could be a threat.

Overtrained, Vader thought. It was unlikely that anyone on this world would dare to attack him, or, for that matter, would have any reason to wish him harm. Still, he could understand their mood. It had been several years since he could move anywhere, even within his own palace, free of the threat of an assassination attempt, or a stray sniper's energy bolt. No, honor guard to the Dark Lord had been no sinecure for some time now, and his men would have to learn how to relax again.

They took the antigrav down to the groundshuttle station, a dank, dimly-lit tunnel that smelled of lubricant and a variety of passengers of different species. Vader half-expected to see some kind of exotic fungi growing up the walls in the cave-like gloom, but there was nothing except the sterile grime of the city, and when he looked at them more closely the dark patches revealed themselves as a collection of greasy smudges and smeared graffiti in several languages, some of which he did not recognize at all. Vader half-consciously noted the other beings passing by: a six-legged creature with a dark exoskeleton and twitching antennae that gave it an abstracted air; a gaggle of green-skinned and long-snouted tourists from one of the rim worlds, clutching guidebooks and holorecorders, chivvied along by an officious tour guide; a family of felinoids trailed by two

spitting and hissing kits; a long-legged and self-confident man with the look of a professional spacer in Corellian vest and jeans.

A muffled howl came to Vader's ears through the soundproofed transparent wall between passengers and the groundshuttle tube. It rose rapidly to a mechanical shriek that made Vader's guards flinch and lay their hands on their blasters, ready to draw. Atavistic childhood terror coursed through Vader on a wave of cold nervous excitement, memories of nursery tales of the evil spiritcreature that wailed the unhouseled dead to their damnation. He set his teeth and, with heroic self-control, managed to face the thing coming toward them down the tunnel with no more than an expression of mild interest. Vader's shamefaced guards released their blasters and gathered the shreds of their dignity around them as the shriek declined to a mutter and died into silence as the shuttle came to a stop. With no more than a brief internal shrinking, Vader gathered his courage and led his people inside.

The shuttle was windowless, its soundproofing almost perfect, and the Sith had a breathing space while the transport drove on into the center of the capital at close to the speed of sound. But his misgivings returned full force as he stepped onto the walkway outside the terminal and stopped dead. His guardsmen only avoided crashing into their lord by quick footwork. The three of them stood stricken by an awed paralysis.

The buildings reached up and up and up on every side. An infinite distance away, where their tops faded into a blur, was a small square of hazy grey that might have been the sky. The blank slabs glittered with solid, unopened windows that seemed more a shield against the hostile world outside than a communication with it, like the mountain of glass which defended the fairy princess against the unwelcome trespass of mere mortal knights. The buildings loomed in the unhealthy air like giants leaning down to study the crawling life forms at their feet, and Vader had the claustrophobic sensation that they might come crashing down on them all at any moment. The entire scene was out of scale, beyond the comprehension of anything living. Vader suppressed a shudder and turned his eyes away from the towering ramparts of the city to the swarming mass of beings and vehicles filling the streets.

"May I serve you, sir?"

A robocab had angled over through the traffic flow to stop in front of them and open its passenger door. Vader eyed it suspiciously. It was nothing like the very few droids the old Dark Lord had permitted in Sith for absolutely necessary tasks: the medical droid, the interpreter/ translator for off-world communications. Here something that seemed to be an ordinary groundcar had somehow acquired a voice and a pseudo personality that subtly degraded his own humanity by its mechanical parody. It was a slave, not a servant; a slave which would never--could never--revolt. It was unclean, shameful. Vader's mouth curled slightly in disgust. Is this, this THING, sentient? he wondered. Intelligent? Can it be a feeling being? Could we who are flesh ever know how or what it can feel in its cold, mechanical heart and imitation brain? How can we trust it when we can understand nothing of what it is?

Now, for the first time, Vader comprehended fully why his father had fought so hard against the creeping influence of Imperial ways in Sith. This utilitarian and accepted robocab, unremarkable to the Imperial world, was symbolic of the whole inner decadence of its culture. They pervert their machines into thinking slaves, and themselves into the slaves of their slaves, Vader thought. He turned to his Sith guardsmen, standing wary but game in the center of this vast new confusion, held here despite their fear by loyalty, human loyalty, to him and loyalty to his House. He felt a sudden warmth. His men, human. He could trust them.

Still, they had to use the robocab. The three of them entered it and Vader gave the cab the address Kenobi had left with him the last time the Jedi had visited the Sith: Ruwenjorin. The machine hummed and clicked to itself, instructed Vader to deposit the proper number of credit tokens, and angled back out into the traffic flow.

Ruwenjorin was in the Old Quarter, far away from the modern section of the city. As the cab carried them toward their destination, the buildings shrank toward human scale and spread out to assume a more rational proportion. Occasional green things began to creep in among the buildings, giving Vader hope that there might be non-sentient life on Malioke after all. A tree, a bush, a carefully tended, meager flowerbox or tiny frontyard garden: it was a far cry from the riotous profusion of the gardens at the prince's palace in Sith, but it was alive.

The Old Quarter was a maze of unplanned, narrow streets with ancient houses dating back almost to the founding of the city, before the Empire had even existed. It was a place full of old secrets, houses turning black walls hidden by climbing vines to the winding cobblestoned public ways. Most of the people here were pedestrians, muffled in dark cloaks and hoods as if they, too, were full of secrets they wished to hide from the outside world. Vader pushed the button to open a window. Faint scents of growing things and a hint of birdsong came to him over the sound of the cab, carried from one of the enclosed gardens. Vader smiled with relief. Perhaps he could survive here after all.

The robocab stopped in front of another wall. Through a gate of wrought metal, Vader could see part of a low, rambling building, its timbers black with age and its stuccoed walls softened and crumbled at the edges by time. It looked as if it had been there forever. Ruwenjorin, oldest, most prestigious, most powerful of the Jedi schools: it stood haughty and unmoving against the tide of history, secure in its own inviolability.

This was something Vader understood. The architecture was totally different, but the school spoke to him in the accents of his own palace, and he knew how to respond to it. He paid the robocab the remainder of the fare and advanced on the doors of Ruwenjorin like a conqueror, his guards trotting in his wake. The doorward took in the two hard-faced guardsmen in Sith dress, ceremonial daggers augmented by utilitarian blasters. Then he turned to the person who was obviously in command. He looked up--and up--into the proud dark-eyed face and then down the giant figure. At eighteen, Vader had filled out and lost the last traces of adolescent awkwardness. He

moved with the controlled power of a trained warrior and the unconscious arrogance of his birth. Before the 'ward could speak, Vader took the initiative. He was back on familiar ground.

"I am Vader. Where is General Kenobi?"

The 'ward bristled at Vader's tone. Strangers at the doors of Ruwenjorin approached humbly and inquired politely, in awe of the Jedi reputation. This one's name meant nothing to the young student. "I will ask if Master Kenobi wants to see you."

"He'll want to see me." Vader started to brush past the 'ward. His guard moved up automatically into flank position.

"Stop right there!" the 'ward said. He made a quick calculation and decided that physical resistance was not a good idea. He reached out with the Force, the power that made the Jedi uniquely feared and respected. A little demonstration of Jedi "sorcery," and the most arrogant layman was quick to crumble, to stand in awe . . . He threw the Force around Vader with the complete confidence of the semi-trained.

The next moment, to his vast surprise, the 'ward found himself slammed back against the wall with the breath knocked out of him and the suggestion of a hand around his throat, threatening to close. There was no finesse in the attack, no Jedi signature in the Force, but the sheer raw Force-power was astonishing and completely unexpected. The two guards stood easily, hands poised above their blasters as if they knew they were unlikely to be needed. The 'ward gave an inarticulate yelp that was echoed in the Force as a soundless cry for help, as Vader gave him a little shake with the Force, like a parent admonishing a naughty child.

"I will leave it to Kenobi to discipline you. Now, for the last time, where is he?"

"Here I am," said a familiar, calm voice. Kenobi emerged from the shadow of the doorway and walked across the front courtyard. Vader released the doorward, who stood rubbing his shoulder where he had banged into the metal gate, and eyeing Vader warily with new respect. The Dark Lord smiled and stepped forward, the minor irritation of the 'ward forgotten.

"I felt you in the Force, Darth. This is a surprise--a welcome one indeed. What brings you to Ruwenjorin? I thought you had quite enough to keep you occupied in Sith."

Vader's face iced over into the haughty, defensive mask with which he had so often faced the old Lord his father, that impenetrable mask which walled out any intimacy of sympathy or question. "I am no longer occupied in Sith--for the time being," he said. "I have come to be a Jedi."

Something flashed over Kenobi's face and jangled in his startled Force aura, an eagerness almost gloating, that was joined, a fraction of an instant later by a tinge of dismay. It was gone before Vader could be sure it was more than his imagination. Ridiculous, he thought, dismissing the fleeting impression as the result of the long strain of recent events in

Sith. When he touched Kenobi's aura again there was nothing he could see or feel in the Jedi except fatherly concern and pleasure in his, Darth's, presence.

"That's wonderful, Darth." Kenobi studied Vader for a long moment, silent, waiting. Vader felt the pressure of Kenobi's silence against his own, like seawater rising against a barrier, more powerful than any direct question: why are you here? What do you want from the Jedi? Vader set himself against it, and did not answer. He had had much experience at silence.

At last, Kenobi gave an almost imperceptible shrug and smiled. "Welcome to Ruwenjorin. Come with me." Vader's guardsmen started to join him, and Kenobi held up a warning hand. "Not your guardsmen, Darth. This is a place for Jedi and students of the Jedi disciplines. No others are allowed beyond the inner courtyard, unless they intend to study here. But your men are welcome to stay in the guest house for as long as you are with us."

The Sith armsmen stirred uncertainly, and Vader caught Seller's alarm at being separated from the lord whose safety was his responsibility. From his determined expression and the hand hovering over his blaster, it was clear that Seller was ready to try to force the gate and take out anyone, Jedi or not, who tried to stop him, rather than be left behind. Absurd, thought Vader. The idea of two Force-blind Sith trying to storm a Jedi citadel with blasters was nothing less than suicidal. What could Seller be thinking of?

"Seller!" said Vader sharply, "you and Naalic will stay in the guest house." He ignored the mute plea on his guardsman's face.

"Yes, your Highness." Seller sounded reluctant but obedient. Vader left his two liege men and the doorward eyeing each other with mutual hostility and contempt, and followed Kenobi across the uneven cobbles of the outer courtyard into the reality of Ruwenjorin. Vader could feel the ancient power breathing from the very stones of the place. He looked around eagerly.

The heart of Ruwenjorin was a garden. In the center of the forward courtyard, where the dormitory, refectory, and classrooms formed a square cloister, stood a fountain which provided a melodic background to all the school's activities. The rest was filled with ground cover and bushes skillfully designed to look natural, where stepping-stones meandered seemingly at random to negotiate the maze. Climbing vines bright with flowers crept up the pillars of the cloister, and several tall old trees made pools of shade. As Vader paused, a bird shot by, only inches from his face, and trilled at him from its landing place on a blooming bush. He laughed and drank in the green smell of the place.

Kenobi led him up a step and down a short hall to his private conference room. Inside were concessions to the outside world in a desk, a 'puter readout system, shelves of tapes. But the room was dominated by the raised meditation alcove set into one wall. Walled and floored in sweet-smelling pale-gold grasscloth, it was bare except for an embroidered cushion in the center and a scroll so ancient that part of its elegant calligraphy had

almost faded into illegibility. Kenobi motioned his guest to a chair beside the desk and sat down there.

Kenobi folded his hands on his desk and studied Vader, as if reluctant to begin. At last he said, "You want to be a Jedi. You have wanted it since you were a child."

"Yes."

"But your father wouldn't allow it then. Do you understand why? No, don't answer--I know you understand what he told you, that your duty lay with Sith. But there are other reasons, too, Darth; reasons perhaps even he did not completely understand. If you stay here, you will have to commit yourself to Ruwenjorin and the Jedi utterly. There can be nothing halfway."

Vader stirred, half in protest.

"I know," Kenobi said. "There are some who come here for a semester or two, a season, to learn techniques to help them heal sick minds and troubled spirits, to study martial arts and the lightsaber, but those are not Jedi. To become Jedi, you will have to turn yourself inside out and unlearn everything you learned in your father's castles. For us who are Jedi, there is no room for any other loyalty or any other identity. Whatever we were before we came here is forgotten. Can you accept that?" The Jedi master showed no sign of emotion in addressing his Highness Lord Vader of Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith. As if, thought Vader, my rank and estates are no more important than some serf's cote.

Anger flared in Vader. "You did not care so little for what I am when you came to seek my help in Sith."

"Yes, Darth, I am well aware of who--and what--you are." Kenobi smiled. "Perhaps more aware than you are yourself. You could have learned much even while you were in Sith: ways to use your strength in the Force better and more fully than Sith training would allow. And you could have been a powerful ally for us there, an ally I'm afraid we will miss sorely, true. But you could not be a Jedi while you were also Heir of Sith, or while you ruled as Dark Lord. To open yourself to the fullness of the Force, you must first empty yourself of responsibility, dominion, rule, decision. You cannot be both Prince and Jedi. You must choose."

Then what are you? Vader thought, shielding. Is General Master Obi-Wan Kenobi, greatest of living Jedi and master of Ruwenjorin, free of dominion, rule, and decision? The calm power in this man was almost oppressive as Vader sat facing him. How can power come from the renunciation of power? Vader asked himself, and how can self come from the renunciation of self? How can I be anything less than Vader? It seemed an unnecessarily complicated mystery, and Vader was irritated by the way it evaded his rational grasp.

Either he was shielding less well than he thought, or Kenobi was used to this reaction from apprentice Jedi, it seemed. Kenobi smiled at him again, and said gently, "No, it isn't a matter of reason. In the final analysis, it's a matter of feeling, not understanding. Of wanting it badly enough to

surrender everything you are to the Force, to become one with it, feel it and flow with it, and trust what you feel. Well?" He cocked an eyebrow at Vader.

"I'm willing to try," said Vader. "I don't understand it, but--"

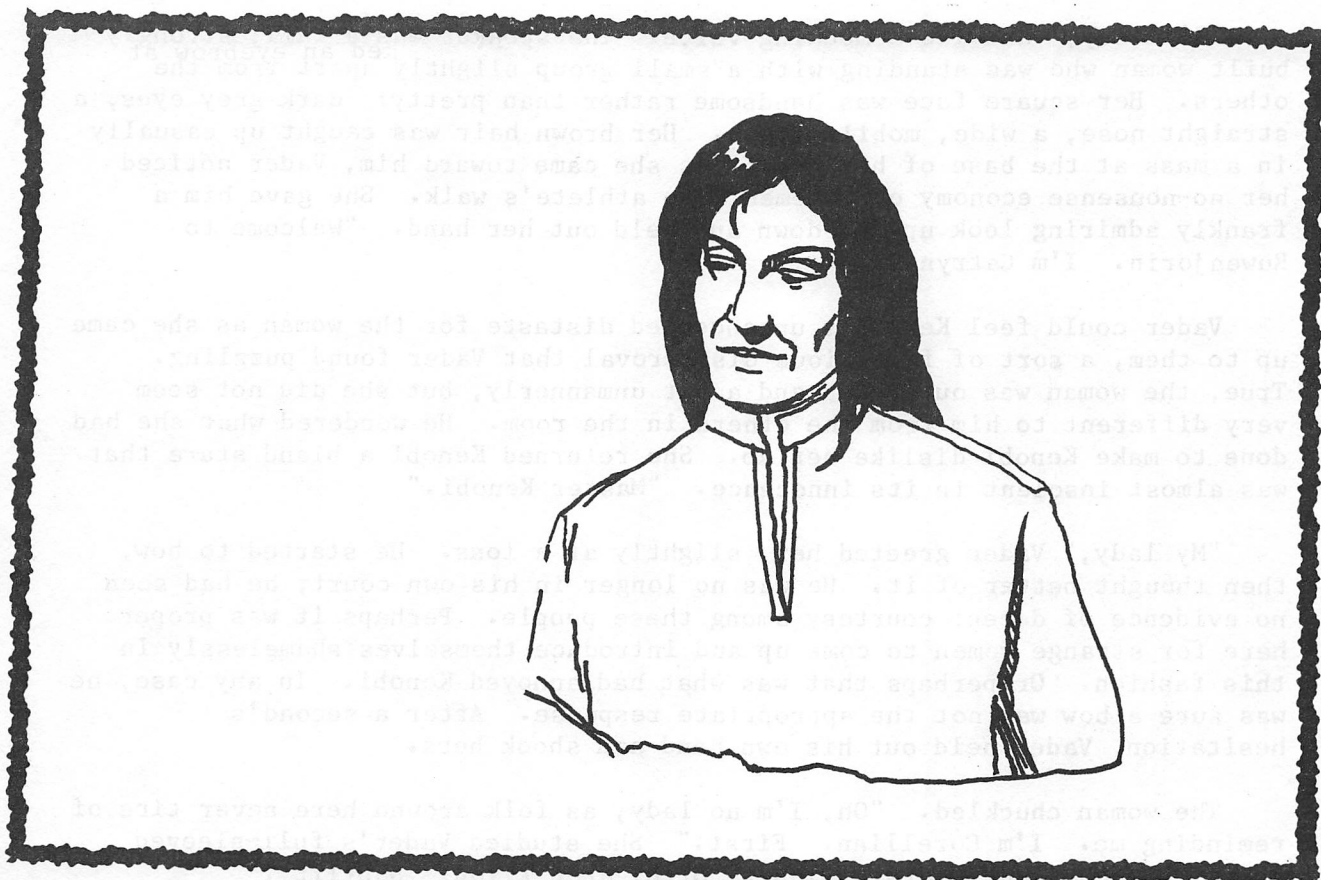
"Do or do not. There is no try." Kenobi chuckled. "As an old . . . friend . . . of mine used to tell me when I was still a novice. Can you do it?"

Vader watched the ironic angle of Kenobi's eyebrow, and felt that Kenobi was mocking him. There was some smug and simple secret here that Kenobi would not tell him until he had proved himself worthy by discovering the answer himself, like the cruel leading questions with which Vader's father had tormented him into thinking through the processes of statescraft. Vader remembered those long afternoons; he could almost smell the heavy leather scent of the rows of prized bound codices ranked behind his father's desk in his father's study (the old Lord had regarded holotapes as fit only for barbarians) and the faintly musty odor of the room's antique rug; see the slash of light that always escaped through the gap in the center of the window's garnet-velvet hangings to creep across the floor at him like a line marking off the time to his moment of humiliation. What, you don't KNOW? the small smile on his father's face would say if Vader hesitated; isn't it obvious? What sort of fool are you that you don't see . . . And Vader would find the answer.

It seemed to Vader that Kenobi had exactly the same little knowing smile at this moment. "Can you do it?" Of course I can do it, thought Vader with determined anger. He thrust down his nagging doubts, let go of his identity as Dark Lord and the weight of lordship he had carried since his father's death, and threw himself into the seductive unreason of Kenobi's demand, without taking time to think, without taking time for cold consideration to hinder him. The surface Vader was all Kenobi's now, and if there remained at Vader's heart a hard inner core that had been born Heir of Sith and imprinted with his father's spirit, an inner core that remained in waiting, unconvinced, neither Vader nor Kenobi recognized it then. "I can," said Vader firmly.

Kenobi nodded in satisfaction. "Very good, Darth." Then he leaned back and laughed. "There's no need to make it sound as if you're accepting a death sentence! I'm sure you'll find life here isn't all that grim and solemn. In fact there are rumors that the students even enjoy themselves occasionally. Let me introduce you to some of your fellow candidates here at Ruwenjorin, and then we can get you settled in."

When they reached the commonroom, Vader was surprised to see how ordinary it looked. He knew that the Jedi preferred to hide their power behind the deceptive trappings of simplicity and plainness, their very ordinariness in dress and speech and surroundings giving them an extra mystery among the common folk, but this could have been the student gathering-place at any university, with its tables and chairs--quite unremarkable, mass-marketed, pale-colored wood tables and chairs, battered



and scratched--on the scuffed tile floor crowded with casually-dressed young beings of half a dozen species. There was a muted clatter from the kitchen beyond the pass-through where a utilitarian caf dispenser sat on the sill.

Kenobi's introduction was equally matter-of-fact. "Gentlebeings, this is our new novice, Darth Vader."

For a moment, Vader was not even sure the master had referred to him, so strange was it to hear his name in public with no titles and no identifying honorifics. "Darth Vader" had a bare and alien sound, as if his identity had been stripped away along with his titles. He started to turn angrily to Kenobi. Then, with a disorienting sense of strangeness, he realized that Kenobi had meant exactly what he said, that whatever he had been before was forgotten here, and among these beings he was simply another student, that to Kenobi, to most of the students in this room, a Prince of Sith was insignificant in comparison with a Jedi.

The moment passed as quickly as it had come. Vader needed no artificial bolstering of titles to impress an audience. As he stood eyeing them with haughty assurance, an appreciative hum ran around the room, tinged with a certain apprehension on the part of the male novices, and something that was considerably more positive on the part of the females. From the safety of the crowd came an awed, anonymous whisper, "My god, he's big!"

"I'll say," drawled a mocking voice. The speaker was a tall, strongly-built woman who was standing with a small group slightly apart from the others. Her square face was handsome rather than pretty: dark grey eyes, a straight nose, a wide, mobile mouth. Her brown hair was caught up casually in a mass at the base of her neck. As she came toward him, Vader noticed her no-nonsense economy of movement, an athlete's walk. She gave him a frankly admiring look up and down and held out her hand. "Welcome to Ruwenjorin. I'm Catryn."

Vader could feel Kenobi's unconcealed distaste for the woman as she came up to them, a sort of fastidious disapproval that Vader found puzzling. True, the woman was outspoken and a bit unmannerly, but she did not seem very different to him from the others in the room. He wondered what she had done to make Kenobi dislike her so. She returned Kenobi a bland stare that was almost insolent in its innocence. "Master Kenobi."

"My lady," Vader greeted her, slightly at a loss. He started to bow, then thought better of it. He was no longer in his own court; he had seen no evidence of decent courtesy among these people. Perhaps it was proper here for strange women to come up and introduce themselves shamelessly in this fashion. Or perhaps that was what had annoyed Kenobi. In any case, he was sure a bow was not the appropriate response. After a second's hesitation, Vader held out his own hand and shook hers.

The woman chuckled. "Oh, I'm no lady, as folk around here never tire of reminding me. I'm Corellian. First." She studied Vader's full-sleeved shirt, breeches and boots. "You're Sith, aren't you? Nobility?"

Vader nodded and Catryn smiled. "I thought so. Well, you'll need a native guide around this place--it won't be much like what you're used to at home, I'll bet. I'll volunteer for the job."

Vader could sense Kenobi growing more irritated by the moment. The tension between the Jedi and this Corellian woman was unmistakable; she seemed to be playing to Kenobi as much as to him, almost baiting Kenobi, although there was nothing in her words which could be identified as directly disrespectful. To all appearances, the woman was polite enough, but Vader had the impression that he was at the center of some intrigue that was clear to everyone in the room except himself. If it had been in Sith, he would have understood the significance of it, but here . . . Why did Kenobi tolerate it? And exactly what kind of game was this woman playing with him?

Once again, Kenobi's silence was pressing in upon him, demanding he reveal himself, demanding a commitment based on that irrational inner loyalty to Kenobi that had been part of Vader for almost as long as the Sith could remember. But Vader drew back from that commitment, with the visceral caution learned through his long apprenticeship as Heir of Sith: he did not have enough data.

And the woman excited him. She was totally unlike the coy and flirtatious ladies of his court; her forthright interest had none of their simpering and groveling which had so irritated him at times. In fact, it was very nearly an outright challenge. There was, Vader felt, something

here of that iron spirit which had defied him in his wife on their wedding night and which had roused him to take her so savagely then, in spite of his nervous inexperience. But he was no longer nervous, or inexperienced. And this woman did not hate him.

Certainly, it would be unchivalrous for a lord of Sith to refuse a lady.

This time he did bow slightly as he answered, "I would be honored."

The woman flashed Vader a triumphant grin that somehow included Kenobi in its orbit, as she started to open her mouth again. Kenobi forestalled her. "Thank you, Catryn. However, I don't think your help will be necessary. Darth is a Jedi candidate, and I'm sure you understand that he will working with his own class, not yours. Perhaps someone else would be more suitable. Now, if you'll excuse us, I'm sure Darth would like to meet some of the other students."

Catryn smiled again and shrugged. "Whatever you say, Master Kenobi." She gave Vader a final searching look. "See you later, Vader." Vader was left with the feeling there was more to her last remark than a conventional leave-taking, as the Corellian woman turned and walked away from them. He was not entirely sure whether he was pleased at that thought or not.

It was several days before he saw her again. It had been Vader's first session with the lightsaber, and he was thoroughly disgruntled. His full-sleeved silk shirt clung stickily to his back and sides, tendrils of hair still damp from the 'fresher were clammy on the back of his neck, and he felt completely exhausted. Random bruises and practice-saber burns reminded him forcibly of connecting blows during the session just finished. Master Kenobi was right: unlearning was going to be much more difficult than learning, here at Ruwenjorin. His trained body kept wanting to take over, to use ingrained reflexes gained through years of Sith swordwork. Wrong. Every time he moved in a natural stroke or block, he was stopped by the training-master. "No, Darth. Flow with the Force. Relax. Trust your feelings. Be passive." It was maddening! His clearest feeling at the moment was the urge to smash something, but he hardly thought that was what the training-master had in mind. Vader's lips drew back in a half-snarl, and he kicked at the floor in a useless gesture to relieve his frustration.

Something caught out of the corner of his eye made him look up. The Corellian woman was lounging against the wall across from him, thumbs tucked into the belt of a sleeveless shortsuit which left the long sweep of her tanned limbs bare, regarding him with grave grey eyes. Vader felt a half-embarrassed impulse to avert his gaze from such an immodest display of legs and arms. He could sense an undercurrent of amusement in the woman.

Vader nodded at her and started to walk by.

"You were good," she said. "I was watching you from the gallery."

"I didn't see you."

"I didn't want you to see me. I wanted to get a look at you in action without any distractions. And you are good. You have the talent."

Vader snorted and his Galactic was more formal than usual in his annoyance. "And upon what do you base that opinion, my lady?"

"Now, don't get in a huff. That wasn't a crack." She grinned. "I'm good; that's what I 'base my opinion' on. Come on, Vader--you took a couple of hits, but nothing's damaged except your pride. Don't worry. What the hell did you expect from a first bout?"

Vader strode down the hall toward the commonroom, his frustrated mood requiring some outlet in physical movement. Catryn walked with him, matching his long strides with her shorter ones. Vader unbuttoned the cuff of his shirt as he walked along and pushed up his sleeve to show an angry red burn fading on the outer edge of his forearm. "Look! I haven't missed a simple overhead block like that since I was thirteen years old." He grimaced. "A remote!"

"I know," she said. "It's the blindfold. When I first came, it took me three weeks to get a hit on that double-bedamned remote with the blindfold on. Some people never get it at all. You got in four hits in your first match. That's why I say you have the talent."

The two came into the commonroom, drew mugs of caf from the dispenser, and sat down at a table. Darth stared unhappily into his mug's dark depths, still unmollified, eyeing the liquid with distaste and wishing it were something civilized like Sith wine instead of this black, bitter stuff.

Catryn took a sip of her caf and braced her feet on the base of the table, tilting her chair back. "I saw you with Kenobi when you came in. He seems to think quite highly of you."

"Who told you that?"

"Things get around," she said vaguely. "Are you going to go Jedi?"

"Yes." Vader felt an impulse to add "if I can" and swallowed it. He would not entertain the possibility of failure. "And you?"

"Naw. I'm just here to learn some of the fighting techniques."

Vader raised his eyebrows as he looked up at her, his full attention caught at last.

She went on. "My dad's partner's got a new ship that's being built for the company, a prototype, going out in a year or so, and he's willing to offer me a berth on her." Catryn's expression grew intense. "God, how I want to be on that ship! A whole new concept in merchant shipping, Dad says; and she's going to be the most beautiful--" She stopped with a little embarrassed laugh, then continued more calmly. "I guess I've got spacer in my blood. After my mom died, my dad didn't have any place to leave me while he was working the fleet, so he took me along with him. But he won't let me take a berth on another captain's ship until, as he says, I've 'proved I can

handle it alone.' He's got a lot of respect for the Jedi." Her nose wrinkled. "God knows why; anyway, he thinks if I can make it here, I can make it anywhere. 'Nothing but the best for my daughter,' he used to say. So here I am. Some of the masters weren't too pleased at letting me in--a Corellian, a money-grubbing merchant's daughter, and one who didn't even want to be a Jedi. But money talks, even to Jedi, and the Order doesn't need the biggest shipping line in the galaxy mad at them. Kenobi didn't like it, but he had to let me in." She paused and shrugged. "I didn't ask to be a blasted Cause; it wasn't my idea. I don't care if the Jedi want us or not, but I'll be damned if I'll let Kenobi push me around! I'm staying here until I get what I want."

Vader responded again to the woman's spirit, even as he was surprised at her anti-Jedi attitude. He recognized, unconsciously, even in this merchant's child, something akin to his own unbending pride in his heritage and himself. He said slowly, "I will be a Jedi. I've wanted it ever since the first time Master Kenobi visited Sith, when I was six. He was head of the diplomatic delegation to my lord father the Dark Lord, asking for alliance and aid. The first time he spoke to me, I knew I was to be a Jedi."

"I'll bet," said Catryn. "As soon as he talked to you. It's obvious he wants you for a Jedi so bad he can taste it."

Vader understood her implication. "Don't be absurd!" he responded. He thought back. It was odd that the emotional significance of that first meeting with Kenobi was still so clear in his mind, and yet he could remember nothing concrete about what the Jedi had said or done. He recalled Kenobi's face bending over his, and the soft, gentle, persuasive voice talking and talking, telling him about the Jedi, their glorious history, their vital mission to preserve peace and justice in the galaxy. Yes, he could remember Kenobi's words going on and on, and then nothing more except his overwhelming desire to please Kenobi by becoming a Jedi himself, to do whatever Kenobi wanted of him. Vader shook his head. Even the memory was compelling, dragging him backward in time, down like an ocean undertow into something dark and irrationally powerful. He swam back toward the surface. Catryn was watching him, concerned by the look of her, and a little alarmed.

"Hey--all right, all right!" she said. "I didn't mean anything. I know what you're going through; I really do. That passive Jedi technique is hell to learn after you're used to something else. My dad taught me a little double-knife style when I was a kid--for self-defense, you know? Downport can be rough on a lot of worlds. Anyway, double-knife's an aggressive technique, like Sith broadsword, and it was really hard to--"

"You know Corellian double-knife?" Vader broke in eagerly.

"Sure I know it. Every spacer knows it, if he wants to live long enough to retire someday. Blasters are useful, but there's nothing better than double-knife for close-in work. Quieter, too."

"I've heard of it, but I've never seen it," said Vader. "Could you teach it to me?"

"Sure. I've got an extra pair of knives in my room. Brought 'em with

me to keep in shape, but I haven't found anybody here decent to spar with; they're all afraid they'll lose their Jedi passive discipline. I could use a little practice. Come on and I'll show you right now." Catryn rose, picked up their cups, and took them over to the rack beside the caf dispenser.

"That's what I like most about being promoted to First," Catryn was saying as she palmed the lock on her door a few minutes later. "A room of my own, even if it is pretty small. Was I ever glad to get out of that novice dorm!"

"Yes, the lack of privacy is annoying." Vader looked around the room. "Although this doesn't look like much of an improvement. Is there space to practice in here?"

"There will be," she said. Vader noted that the room had the orderly impersonality of a spacer's cabin, with neatly racked tapes beside the flat slab which hinged down from the wall to serve as a desk, a floor clear of clutter, and a foldaway bed with a blanket tight as a drumhead over it. Only a few small details gave any hint of the person who occupied the room. One of these was a polished box that Catryn took down from a shelf over the tape rack. Vader identified the glowing rich grain and spicy scent of expensive kallawood. Catryn put the box down carefully on the desk and opened it.

Vader drew in a breath in appreciation. "Beautiful!" he murmured. Inside were two sets of Corellian double-knives, the right-hand ones longer and heavier, almost short-swords, designed for slashing and stabbing, the left-hand ones lighter, made for blocking. Vader picked one up and examined it with the obvious expertise of a man familiar with fine edged weapons, as Catryn watched him with satisfaction written on her face. Vader tested the balance, admiring the perfect temper, the exquisite workmanship, the more-than-razor sharpness of the edge. A lovely weapon.

"They're a little light for you, of course," Catryn said.

"Hmmm," Vader acknowledged, concentrating on the blade. He tried a few passes with the right-hand knife, compensating for the lighter weight and shorter reach of the blade as compared to his Sith broadsword, falling naturally into a practiced swordsman's stance.

"Nice," Catryn said at last, after watching Vader for a while with patent approval. "Here, let me show you how we use them." She put the box back on the shelf and pushed the control to retract all the furniture in the room, giving them an open area. Catryn led Vader through a series of moves, demonstrating the Corellian style of using the second blade in place of a shield.

It did not take Vader long to follow what she was teaching him. The exchange of strokes grew faster and less experimental. After a few minutes, Catryn jumped back and cried, "Hold!" Vader stopped. Catryn slapped a panel on the wall, which opened to show two fencing masks among a collection

of other items. She threw one to Vader, who stuck his left-hand blade through his belt and caught it easily. He laid down the other knife and moved to put the mask on.

"Armor?" he asked with a lift of his brows.

"No," Catryn shook her head. "Too heavy; doesn't give you enough feedback. The whole point of double-knife is quickness and skill; nobody's going to be wearing armor in downport, not unless they're paranoid or incompetent. Too much trouble."

Vader was dubious about her explanation. He had worn Sith battlearmor all his life, and it was flexible and light enough to fight in with no difficulty. He suspected the Corellian aversion to armor was a cultural prejudice, a part of the Corellian concept of personal courage. Bodyarmor implied a calculated concern for personal safety that the Corellian spacers evidently regarded as contemptible. Vader shrugged mentally. If this Corellian woman could fight without armor, so could he.

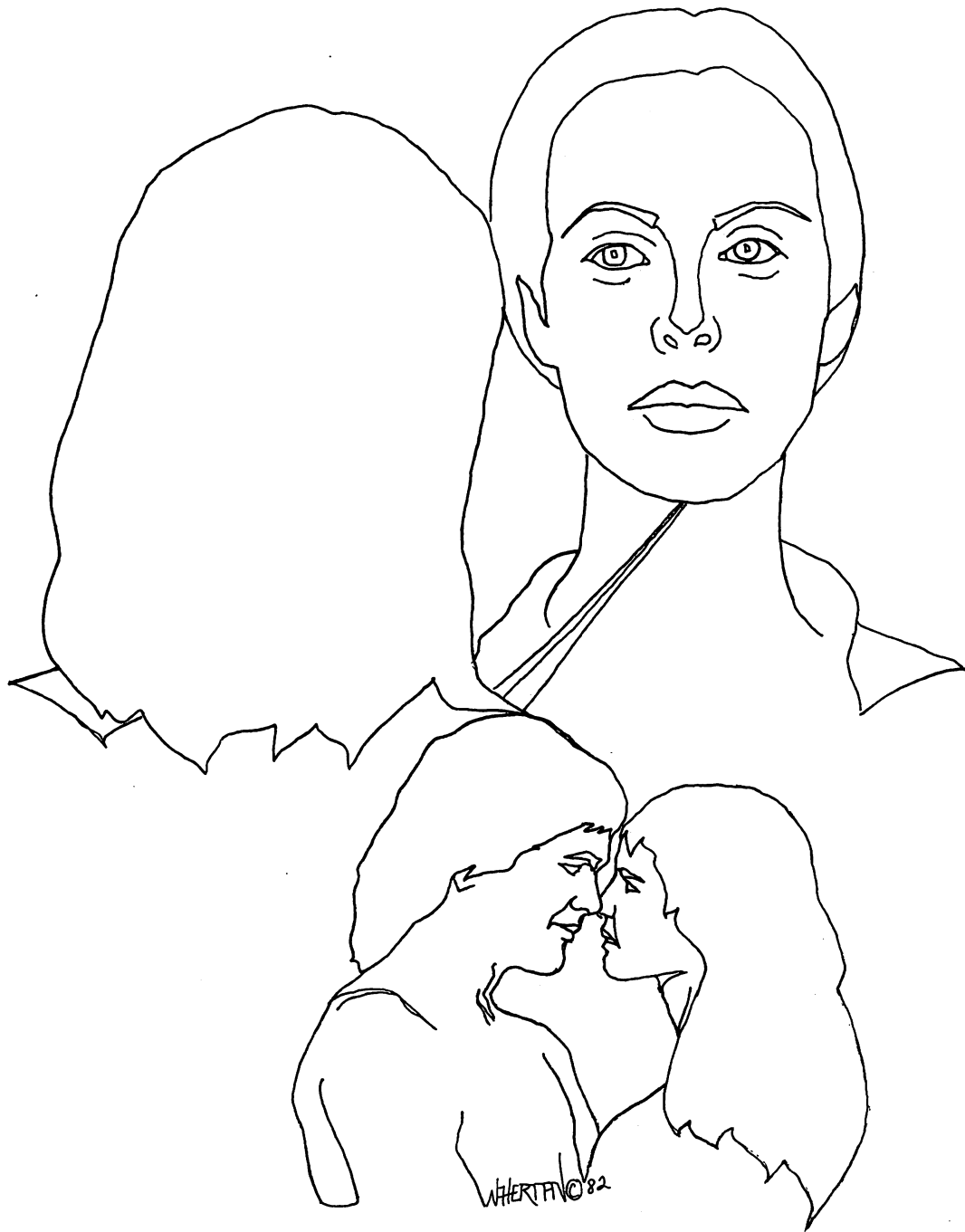
Catryn was studying him. "All right. Strip," she said. Vader's startled reaction must have been visible, for Catryn grinned and added, ". . . just the shirt, Vader. Wouldn't want to get a cut in all that lovely silk. That stuff's much too expensive to waste on a practice match. These blades aren't blunt, after all."

"Merchant!" Vader grinned back, caught up in her eagerness, and slipped off his shirt. Catryn's smile widened, her eyes sparkling.

The two moved back into position, no longer as teacher and student but as sparring partners. Their first moves were cautious, exploratory, respectful of the deadly blades, testing of an unfamiliar opponent's reactions. Then as Vader recognized the compact assurance and competence of his partner, the joy of battle rose in him, the aggressive instinct to attack he had been forced to hold in check during the Jedi practice session. Hot excitement flared behind his tight smile, an excitement he could see mirrored in Catryn's eyes. They circled, feeling each other's responses like a pair of lovers, like partners in a dance, perfectly in tune, sharing the pleasure of each other's skilled reaction in thrust and parry. Finally Catryn slid by under Vader's arm with a stroke of her knife that would have laid open his entire left side if it had connected. She was fiercely intent now, no longer playing, committed to the exchange. Vader could feel the passion in her clearly in the Force.

Vader evaded neatly with that cat-like quickness that was so remarkable in a man of his bulk, taking only a shallow scratch along the ribs. As he faced her again, Catryn moved in with an upward stroke. Vader blocked her left hand with his own, caught the right-hand stroke square with forearm against forearm, sending Catryn's knife flying with the numbing power of his blow, and before Catryn could recover, Vader had the point of his knife aimed at her throat for a killing thrust.

Catryn lowered her remaining weapon. "You catch on fast," she said in a soft, slightly shaky voice, between gasps for air. She pulled off her mask and Vader followed suit.



"Yes," said Vader, "I do."

He bent down, picked up the knife she had dropped when his arm connected with hers, and handed his pair to her along with it. She turned and began replacing them in the box one by one. Vader felt the echoes of her aura, felt his perception reaching out to mingle with hers in the Force, felt himself joining with her awareness of him and of herself. He shared her rising emotional response again, reading her thoughts.

As Catryn stood wiping down the knife which had caught his ribs, she felt Vader's hands at the back of her neck. With a quick, deft motion, he pulled the pin holding her hair and it came tumbling down her back. He put his hands under it, weighing the heavy, silky mass of it warm against the backs of his hands as his fingers gently stroked the sides of her neck under her ears. Vader could follow the fleeting, irrational thought that crossed Catryn's mind that it would take no effort, no effort at all, for him to tighten his grip and strangle her. She could feel his power, the incredible strength of those hands, even through the lightest touch. She surrendered to it joyfully, one with Vader now.

"Much better," he said, and he could tell she heard the rough edge to his voice, the undercurrent of urgency in him. "It looks much better that way."

She turned to face him, ran her hands up his broad chest and around his neck as he leaned down to her lifting mouth and claimed it with his own, then pulled her fiercely against him. There was no need for further words. They were perfectly in rapport, caught up in the mutual excited aftermath of combat. Vader's hands found the fastening of Catryn's shortsuit as hers moved to his breeches, and then they were naked, touching everywhere, melting together, mind and body, into a perfect unity of pleasure. Vader broke contact only long enough to extend the bed, gather Catryn up, and lay her down on it with firm authority, before he joined her again and she gave up all rational thought to the savage intensity of his passion and hers.

Some time later, she slid carefully out from under his covering arm and stood up. Looking down fondly at his sleeping figure, Catryn murmured, "No, my dear. I do not think even Kenobi will be able to make a Jedi out of you. Passive just ain't your style."



"I don't believe it," Naalic said, looking up from the flimsy sheet he had just removed from the guest house holoplayer. "I just don't believe it."

"Hmmp?" Seller grunted. Seller always grunts, Naalic thought. Sometimes Naalic wondered whether, if it weren't for the necessity of his periodic reports to his Highness on the state of his Highness's honor guard awaiting his Highness's pleasure in the guest house at Ruwenjorin, Seller would forget how to talk entirely. This time the grunt had an interrogative tone, so Naalic continued.

"This word from my sister-in-law. She's frantic. They've taken her nephew away to Lliryanthi, and she can't find out what's happened to him. They won't let her in to see him, and she can't get any word out. She doesn't even know if he's still alive."

Seller put down the blaster he was cleaning, wiped his big hands on his heavily-muscled thighs and sat back, pushing dark hair off his forehead. He wore an expression of polite interest. Well, that was something. Naalic thought with annoyance that the only things that seemed to interest Seller, really, were his weapons and his Highness's welfare. It wasn't that Seller was stupid, certainly; just . . . singleminded. Naalic had been trying to communicate some of his own passion for holochess to Seller, in hopes of making their boring wait in the guest house endurable. So far he had had only limited success.

"She says she wants me to appeal to his Highness to see if we can find out anything about what his Highness's cousin is doing. The men who took her nephew away were wearing Koric's livery."

"Fat chance," said Seller.

Naalic looked up from the sheet again and smiled ruefully. "She's a fine woman, my sister-in-law, but a bit simple when it comes to politics."

"What's the man accused of?"

"Treason, evidently." At Seller's questioning tilt of the head, Naalic continued, "Lord Garit was accused of plotting Koric's death, so Lurra says here. Nobody seems to know what the evidence was against him, but he was executed anyway, and his whole Household included in the attainder against his family. Lurra's nephew was master of Lord Garit's hawks. I ask you," Naalic said in disgust, "Lord Garit's hawks? What do Lord Garit's hawks have to do with treason?"

Seller shrugged.

"And why Lord Garit?" Naalic asked. "He didn't support either Koric or his Highness in the war. In fact, I used to know one of his grooms, and the man told me Lord Garit hadn't the backbone to come up with a positive opinion on the state of the weather, and couldn't find his own delwa's stirrup without someone to show him where it was. Like I said, it doesn't make any sense." He stared down at the sheet again. "I think Koric has finally gone off it altogether. It's the only explanation."

Seller grunted again, noncommittally, and turned back to his blaster.

"By the Bright Lord!" Naalic burst out, exasperated. "You're a big help, Seller. It's like talking to a wall . . . " He slapped the sheet down on the arm of his chair and stood up to begin walking back and forth, hands clasped behind his back. "I wish his Highness would take us back to the Sith. I'm worried about my family. And I don't trust these Jedi."

Seller concentrated on swabbing out the barrel of his blaster with

faintly lascivious enthusiasm. "It's not for us to say what his Highness ought to do, Naalic."

"No, no; of course not. But--by the Bright Lord, Seller; don't you want to go home?"

Seller looked up at him. "Yes," he said quietly, and there was such longing in that one word that Naalic suddenly felt rebuked, like a child scolded for chattering on about some toy he wanted. He fell silent as Seller returned to sliding in a charged power-clip. Seller raised the weapon to eye level, and examined it, his face grave. Naalic could understand in that gesture what the weapon was to Seller, a distillation of his very self. Then the guardsman turned and thrust the blaster back into its leather holster with an abrupt, determined gesture. Seller sat with his hand over the holster for a long moment, and his blunt fingers lingered, almost tenderly, on the Vader luthra-hawk tooled into it. His expression grew distant, and Naalic thought he saw there a certain wistful, selfless hunger.

There was nothing more than Naalic could say. He sat down again, feeling vaguely ashamed.

Vader had only sporadic contact with Catryn over the next year. Jedi candidates were not encouraged to mingle with the other students, and Kenobi kept a close eye on his new prize. He saw her in public only at arms practice and in the commonroom. She was not one of the best of the Jedi-style fighters; she lacked the instinctive unity with the Force that made them able to act without thinking, and her reactions were a fraction too slow, too calculated. But with her own weapons, she moved like a striking cat.

Yes, Vader concluded, she reminds me of the hunting cats of the Sith uplands. Her attitude toward the object of her interest at the moment was amiably predatory: testing, teasing, searching out weaknesses, quick to seize on them and enjoy the capture. Most of the male novices had attracted her attention at one time or another. Toward the rest, she was aloof, more indifferent than unfriendly, and she lived in a state of casual tolerance edged with thoughtless contempt with her fellow female students. Typical Corellian, Vader pegged her, too independent to have much concern for anyone except herself.

Still, he seemed to be one of her favorites. She usually managed to be in the gallery when he was matched for a practice bout and she waylaid him whenever she could escape Kenobi's vigilance. Vader, in turn, found her a pleasant diversion and was glad enough to escape the crushing closeness of the novice dormitory for the illusion of privacy offered by Catryn's room.

As the semester moved on, there was no question that Kenobi's judgment of Vader's ability had been accurate. The Force accepted him, and he slipped into it with hardly a ripple, flowing with it, yet making himself master of it. He had the strength to treat the flow almost as a toy, matching himself against it with easy grace, and exploring all its aspects

while respecting its underlying power. Within half a year, Vader was winning matches against first and second level students, often against a third, and Kenobi was quietly satisfied. The Sith glowed under the praise of his masters, the attention of his fellow students, and grew almost affable. He was still Sith: he retained a tendency to use his saber one-handed, broadsword-style, against easy opponents, and he never lost the underlying aloofness that set him apart from the others and tinged their admiration for his skill with exasperation at his bland air of superiority.

And, beneath it all, there was something wrong.

Kenobi was sitting at his desk going over some paperwork when a student knocked and announced, "Master Vesserek is here to see you, Master."

Kenobi was pleased. There were few people more useful to the Jedi than Master Mond Vesserek, whose nominal position as a recruiter of students for the Jedi schools took him all over the galaxy and neatly covered his other job of chief courier for information too sensitive for public means of communication from one group of Jedi to another. He was, to all appearances, a totally ineffective academic, but the small, stooped body with the wispy grey hair and nearsighted air of abstraction hid a sharp and observant mind. Kenobi rose and welcomed him, waving him to a chair and pouring him a glass of wine from the decanter kept on a side table for visiting notables. He turned back to the desk and switched on the sounddampers.

"It's good to see you, Mond. Is this visit business or social?"

"A little of both, Obi-Wan." Vesserek passed on information about Jedi activity in connection with the new rebel base on Dantooine, just beginning to grow, with Jedi help, from a collection of disgruntled local radicals to a command center for Empire-wide subversion. The outpost had carried out several small-scale sabotage missions, disguised as the work of apolitical criminals, and was planning to move on to bigger things. There was also word of Bail Organa's new delaying tactics in the Senate and his private assurances of support for dissident Jedi propaganda and terrorist activities based on Alderaan.

Then Vesserek grew more sober. "The rest of the news isn't so favorable, I'm afraid. Our school at Toraveldt was attached and burned. Fifty killed, most of them novices and firsts. The rest got away. Some of them will be coming here, I expect. Master Vell was overpowered and killed while he was holding the rearguard for them."

"I knew him." Kenobi stared into space for a few minutes. Then: "Imperial troops?"

"Local mob. Spontaneous riot--they charged the school shouting about 'Jedi sorcery' and 'death to the Jedi devils' and so on. At least that was the story. The Imperial propaganda machine seems to be functioning very effectively on Toraveldt, unfortunately for us."

"You say this was the story?"

"Yes," said Vesserek. He smiled humorlessly. "But the Empire has more than one group of 'disaffected elements'. There was a group of Corellian spacers in port, and one of them recognized at least one of the leaders of the mob as an Imperial agent provocateur. There's no question the riot was set up by Imperial intelligence--very cleverly stage-managed, to be sure, but quite clearly deliberate. It looks as though this underground war of ours is starting to cost us real casualties. We're going to have to take direct action soon."

"Hmmm," said Kenobi. "And what do you think it means, Mond? Other than an Imperial attempt to make themselves generally obnoxious?"

"Test of strength," said Vesserek promptly. He puffed on his pipe briefly, looking thoughtful.

"Hmmm?" Kenobi nudged him again as the pause started to stretch out uncomfortably.

"The Empire's deadly serious about this, you know, Obi-Wan. They want to wipe out every one of us and destroy the very concept of the Jedi. I see it everywhere I go. It's getting harder and harder to recruit new candidates; the people are more and more afraid to support us. A lot of them are even afraid to talk to a Jedi any more. And some of them are actually starting to believe that we're 'Jedi devils'."

"That's hard to believe. After the Clone Wars--"

Vesserek snorted. "You know how fickle the lay folk are. And how credulous. They'll believe anything if you tell it to them long enough and loud enough. So far, of course, we've been relatively safe because of the sheer inertia of people in the mass, and most of all, precisely because we are a secret organization. The Empire doesn't know what we can do and how much real power we have, what our training involves. Now it's trying to organize an effective campaign against us. They'll keep on increasing the pressure, to find out what our limits are before they hit us with extermination tactics." He paused, warming his hands on the bowl of his pipe. "It doesn't look good. But we do have one major advantage: our own people's loyalty to the Order. We've been very fortunate in our sworn Jedi, Obi-Wan."

Kenobi gave him a questioning look.

"That's the key," Vesserek went on. "As long as the Empire is working from the outside, they can't know just what we can do. We could be holding some final counteroffensive, some tremendously powerful Force technique, in reserve to use against them in the crunch. They won't take that chance unless they're really desperate. But if they had one of our masters, or a senior student, someone who knows the training, and just what it involves--" There was no need for him to finish the sentence.

"Yes," said Kenobi slowly. "All it would take is one. One renegade."

"As I say, we've been careful--and fortunate--so far; but it can't last

forever. Someday, somewhere, the Empire's going to find itself a traitor Jedi, and when that happens--"

"--We'd all better be prepared. With a way out."

"Just so," Vesserek nodded. "I'm making sure all the schools are aware of what's happening, ready to move if it's necessary. Contingency plan."

"Let's hope it won't be necessary."

"Yes," said Vesserek dryly. "Let's hope so."

There was an awkward pause. Kenobi cleared his throat. Vesserek leaned back and eyed Kenobi patiently through the haze of smoke.

Kenobi leaned forward and folded his hands on his desk, smiling. He changed the subject. "So, Mond, have you had a chance to look over our new crop of students here at Ruwenjorin? What do you think of them?"

"Promising; promising. Your little public relations type in the office took me for a tour." Vesserek chewed on the pipe stem absently. "There was one that bothered me, though, that big Sith novice. What's his name?"

"Darth Vader. Amazing, isn't he? I have great hopes for him."

"Yes; so I heard from the other students," Vesserek said in a tone which took Kenobi aback somewhat. "You've been a bit obvious, Obi-Wan. And I'm not sure you're seeing him as objectively as you should."

"Why do you say that?"

"I had a chance to probe him while he was busy with a match." Vesserek rubbed his salt-and-pepper mustache absently and frowned. "I don't trust that boy. That double conditioning doesn't feel all that stable to me. He's a proton torpedo primed to blow, and I don't want to be around when somebody pushes the wrong button. I think you should hold off on giving him upper-level training until you can Clear him."

"I know it's a risk, Mond," said Kenobi. "Damn that father of his anyway! Amateurs like that shouldn't be allowed to play around with Force-conditioning."

"The Sith aren't exactly amateurs, you know. The Genetic Council's been linebreeding for Force-ability for about five hundred years now."

"Yes, yes; I know. And it didn't matter as long as the boy stayed in Sith to inherit. I had no idea when I conditioned him that he was going to get tossed out by his cousin and end up here." Kenobi appealed to his guest. "I couldn't pass up a chance like that. You felt that power. We need him!"

"Yes, I felt it. He's the most powerful novice I've ever seen, and that isn't surprising with Sith royal blood. I agree. We need him. But,

Obi-Wan--it still could blow up in your face, you realize that." He tamped down his pipe, avoiding Kenobi's eyes. "Can you Clear him?"

Kenobi shook his head slowly. "I'm not sure. The imprinting is awfully deep--part of the birth trauma, right down to the basic structure of his personality. I don't know if I can Clear it without causing major damage to his mind. I want to wait until he is more fully committed intellectually to the Order. If I can persuade him consciously, it may help break the unconscious pattern, or at least weaken it enough so that I can work with it."

"So will you keep him at novice level until then?"

"I can't." Kenobi ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "Darth is no fool. He knows he's ready, and if I don't advance him, he'll ask why. That could be embarrassing. He already has enough Force-sense to detect a direct falsehood. All I can do is misdirect him until the right time."

"And if you can't?" Vesserek persisted.

"He's a proud boy, and a Sith lord still, for all that he's been trying to adjust to Ruwenjorin very hard. I doubt that he'd appreciate learning he's been guided. He wants to think he did it all on his own. I'm afraid we'd lose him. We can't afford that."

"No, you're right. He'd be a menace running around half-trained with that much power, like a little boy with a blaster and no idea of what to do with it. And it'd be even worse if somebody who does know what to do with him gets hold of him."

"Like the Emperor."

"Like the Emperor." The two Jedi traded significant and very unhappy looks across the desk. After a few minutes, Vesserek abruptly drained his glass and stood up. Kenobi rose too.

"Well, keep me informed." He shook hands with Kenobi. "And Obi-Wan, keep an eye on that boy."

"I will."

Meanwhile, in another part of the dojo, Vader lay on his side with his head on his hand, watching Catryn put up her hair. The distraction of the visiting dignitary had given them a chance to get together for love-making and conversation, and Vader was unburdening himself of opinions he knew his master and the other Jedi candidates would not approve. He glowered at Catryn's reflection facing him in the mirror, and slammed his free hand into his pillow.

"It's so frustrating! I know I can move ahead and take the sixth-level exercises, but Master Kenobi keeps telling me to wait. I have the power; I

can feel it. I've tried some of the exercises on my own when none of the masters were around, and--"

Catryn turned toward him, her hands frozen in the act of pinning. "Alone? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Dangerous? For me?" Scorn was obvious in his voice.

"Well, I suppose not for you . . . "

Vader eyed her suspiciously. He was never sure how seriously to take her cheerful insolence, but he could feel there was no malice in it, merely amused affection.

Catryn slipped in the last pin and came over to sit on the end of the bed. She tucked her legs under her, put her elbows on her knees, and propped her chin on her folded hands. "What are you in such a hurry for, Darth? What are you going to do with all this training--run errands for Kenobi?"

"The Jedi are the only thing holding this galaxy together. Without us, it would be every world for itself, sheer anarchy. We must be strong to preserve order, to provide freedom and peace for all the people of all the worlds."

Catryn wrinkled her nose. "That sounds like a campaign speech. Besides, I thought the Emperor had the same general idea. Only, I think he thinks he's in charge. Or do you think we ought to go back to the Republic?"

Vader shrugged impatiently. "What does it matter whether the Senate or the Emperor rules in name; the Jedi rule in fact. And someday--"

"Someday you will rule the Jedi, right?" Catryn smiled and shook her head. "That's what I love about you, Darth--your overwhelming modesty."

"And why not? Who is better qualified than I?" Vader looked offended.

She reached out her hand and put it gently over his mouth. "Shh, I'm teasing you; you know that. I wouldn't be surprised if someday you are Master General. There's nobody in the present Jedi class who can touch you."

"True. I deserve to rule." Vader sat up, leaned back against the wall, and stared out over Catryn's head. Half to himself, he continued, "I must rule."

"Why, Darth?" said Catryn softly, and there was puzzled sympathy in her voice. "Why do you have to try so hard? You're a good Jedi; maybe you'll even be a great Jedi, one of the ones that get listed in the Book of Masters. Isn't that enough?"

"No!" Vader looked at her, angry. "It's not enough. I'm the best and I intend to be the best. I have the power to go beyond anything the Jedi have yet accomplished, to show the whole galaxy a new and better order, something greater than it has ever seen. I would betray myself--would

betray the power that the Force has given me--if I accept anything less. And . . . " He stopped, looked down, and said slowly, "It is the only way I can save Sith."

"Sith? But--what about your cousin?" said Catryn, more puzzled than ever.

"Do you think that because my traitor cousin falsely claims my title, my people are any less my people?"

"Darth," said Catryn, now completely serious, "didn't you tell me Kenobi said you had to forget all that--that you couldn't be a prince and a Jedi both?"

Vader turned his head sharply away. Catryn could tell he was caught between powerful conflicting emotions, his whole body vibrating with the intensity of his feelings. He seemed to be searching for some rational, logical explanation, some reason for the two impulses struggling within him, neither with any justification he could give to convince a cynical Corellian. As usual when he was not in control of the situation, anger won out over his other feelings. "It is a matter of honor--which you would not understand, merchant. I am Vader. I am not bound by Kenobi's fears or your low-born limitations. I can be Sith and Jedi!"

Catryn jumped up, fists clenched. "You can't talk to me like that!"

Wordlessly, Vader stood up and scooped up his breeches, reached for his boots. Yes, he could talk to her like that, Catryn realized. Vader of Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith--who had there ever been to require humility of him, to teach him the equality of any being who was not Vader? His fellow Sith would expect nothing else, and the folk at Ruwenjorin did not care. It had nothing to do with Vader's ability as a Jedi; it meant nothing to them. Only she, Catryn, saw; only she had somehow come to touch, to care for, the Vader who was neither Sith nor Jedi, but simply Vader.

"Darth," she said. "Darth, I'm sorry. Please don't go."

He paused, his expression haughty and frozen, and she sighed inwardly. DAMN his aristocratic arrogance. He insults me and I apologize. Right. That makes sense. Why in God's name do I go through this with him? she asked herself; I'm not one of his damned subservient Sith women--nobody pushes me around like that. Her sense of humor reasserted itself as she realized the irony of the situation. No wonder we keep striking sparks, she thought. A Corellian spacer's brat and a Sith aristocrat--you couldn't find two more independent, touchy people if you tried. We're two of a kind. No wonder I can get inside that thick head of his and tell what's going on in there. "I am sorry, Darth. I apologize. But it's not really me you're mad at, is it?"

"No," Vader finally admitted in a grumpy tone.

"So don't jump all over me." He mouth turned up lopsidedly. "Hey--I'm on your side!"

Vader unbent, his quick anger gone. He pushed the control for a chair, sat down, and set his boots down in front of him. He sat staring at them with a frown of absent concentration, as if he had never seen them before, absorbed in his thoughts.

Catryn came over, put her hands on his shoulders, kissed him lightly on top of his head. She noticed again, as she did every time she touched him, the silky smoothness of his long, clean hair, the warm male scent of him, the rocklike strength of his body, his solid bulk. Even at his quietest, his least erotic, moments, he aroused her simply by his presence. THAT's why I put up with so much from you, Vader, she thought with a quick flash of inner laughter as she felt the familiar stirring of desire; you're the best damn lay I've ever had. That, and . . . No, she told herself nervously as her mind skittered away, half in panic, from the thought, no. That's all . . . Friendship and a little fun, for now; that's ALL. There's no room in my life for anything else . . .

Hurriedly, she reached for the first distracting thing she could think of. "I don't understand what you can do for Sith here. Sith isn't even part of the Empire."

Vader looked up at her, reading the emotion in her, reading her attempt to smooth over their brief disagreement, to evade her uncomfortable thoughts, with what were to her political irrelevancies. She would never understand, he knew, that to him these things were not the dry stuff of newstape headlines, the dull, far-away conflicts of nameless beings, but the center of his heart, the source of his honor. He could not expect her to understand. He responded to the underlying meaning of her question as he answered the surface. "That is the way I intend to keep it, Catryn. The Sith cannot fight the Empire; it has no hope of surviving as an independent system unless it can oppose the Empire with its own weapons. And if it does that, it will have already lost, for it will no longer be Sith. I am the only one who can save it. When I have the Emperor's ear, I will make sure Sith is left untouched."

"When you have the Emperor's ear?"

"Yes." There was no trace of doubt in Vader's voice.

"Oh," was all that Catryn could quite manage. She was awed at his supremely arrogant certainty, and the sense of power that flowed from him excited her. She ran her hands slowly down the warm planes of his pectoral muscles, savoring the soft roughness of hair against her fingertips. Distractedly, she murmured, "What about Kenobi? Will he let you go?"

Vader understood her tone and smiled as he answered, "Kenobi is a wise man. I have learned much from him since I came here, and I will learn more before I leave. And one thing I have learned--he is my teacher, not my master. No one is my master, even among the Jedi."

"H'mmm," Catryn murmured agreement, giving herself up to her rising desire for him.

Amused, Vader also abandoned the attempt to continue a rational



discussion, stood up, and pulled her around in front of him against his chest. After several more minutes, he reached up to unpin her hair again.

"Darth!" Catryn said with a comic imitation of annoyance, "I just got it up again!" She grinned wickedly up into his face. "And, as a matter of fact--"

"Catryn!" said Vader warningly, and leaned down to stop her mouth with his own as she laughed.



If Catryn had relayed this conversation to Kenobi, he would have been a good deal more concerned than he had been when he spoke to Vesserek. But Catryn was not likely to communicate anything not strictly necessary to the Jedi master, as Vader was well aware. It took none of his growing sensitivity in the Force for him to appreciate their mutual antagonism. In fact, he recognized with wry humor, part of his own attraction for her was his rank. She had no awe of nobility in itself, but it pleased her to spite Kenobi's pride in the high status of Ruwenjorin's elite student body by seducing the most high-born of them all, she, the daughter of a mere merchant. No matter how rich her family, or successful her studies, Catryn would always be a vulgar social upstart to the more traditional masters. But Vader cared nothing for the distinctions of Imperial society. The only nobility he recognized was Sith, and he found the masters' pretensions

amusing. He laughed and accepted them all impartially as his inferiors, in this as in everything else.

Vader threw himself into his exercises--both those assigned by his teacher and those he searched out on his own--with determination, and grew in the Force. There was no doubt he was dedicated to the Jedi, talented in Jedi ways as none had been for generations. Kenobi watched him, torn between pride and unease, waiting for the right moment to attempt the deconditioning, never finding it quite the time. He watched the proud, confident, brilliant giant, and his heart grew cold with fear that if he tampered with Vader his potential would be lost, his value to the Order damaged. There were so many ways it could go wrong, so many ways his treasure could be ruined and lost to the great effort the Jedi would soon be making against the Empire. And so Kenobi hesitated: There is still time; he's only a boy yet; next week . . . next month . . . soon--

He was reassured by Vader's enthusiasm for everything the Order could offer, for Vader seemed as fully committed a Jedi as any man could be. Perhaps Kenobi, in his own self-assurance, did not see quite how adept his pupil was growing, how skilled at Reading others in the Force, and how skilled at concealing those aspects of his own aura he did not wish discovered. Kenobi noticed no trace of interest in Imperial politics in his student; Kenobi hardly noticed that he expressed no opinion on the worth of the Republic either. He does not care, Kenobi decided; he will serve the Jedi, and whatever we support, he will support.

So matters stood when, some eighteen standard months after Vader had come to the school, the Emperor commanded the entire Jedi class to attend a special reception to celebrate--as the proclamation read--"the long and loyal service of the Jedi Order to the Empire." The masters were well aware it was a polite method of getting a close look at potential Jedi troublemakers. Kenobi fumed, but there was no way the school could refuse a direct Imperial command, especially one allegedly honoring their Order. Each master spoke with his students, cautioning them to be wary, to say nothing more than the bare minimum, and to keep their mental shields up.

"Remember," Kenobi added to the little cluster of students which included Vader, "the Emperor is a high adept. You'll need all your skill to keep your minds closed. He will expect that, and I doubt he will probe deeply unless you give him some reason to suspect you. But if he does, he can probably break your shield; he's one of the most powerful Force-sensitives in the galaxy. That's what makes him so dangerous to us. So guard yourselves and give him no cause for suspicion."

"Suspicion of what, Master?" asked one of the Firsts. "We haven't done anything--" The unspoken question hung in the air: Have we?

"No," Kenobi answered. "But the Jedi are an independent power base, not a part of the Imperial system. Any relics of the Republic, no matter how apolitical, are suspect. We don't have to do anything; we just have to exist."

The student nodded, satisfied. But Vader, standing on the fringe of the group, caught a very faint seepage from Kenobi's shield, too faint for the

rest of the students, too faint for him to Read it exactly. Kenobi tended to be careless around his own students, where he felt safe. But there was something hidden there. "We haven't done anything." H'mmm, I wonder, thought Vader to himself, careful to keep his own thoughts shielded. He was Jedi, but he was Heir of Sith first, and he had no illusions that as powerful an organization as the Order could exist and survive against the hostility of the government without political ambitions. He had suspected nothing else. And here, Vader thought, is the opportunity I have waited for.



The Imperial court was rich; it spoke--indeed it shouted--of wealth and power, the tribute of a hundred worlds. And it glittered: the jewelry, the icy satin of formal garb, the cut-glass chandeliers, the crystal wine glasses, the courtiers, all sparkled and flashed like a frosted window in sunlight. It was all hard surface and fashionable style, where the gowns and the manners were as new and expensive as the titles.

At its center, yet separate from it, was the Emperor, a cold and secret darkness apart from the bright shimmer around him. He sat and watched and said nothing; and as the evening wore on his eyes turned more and more often to the handsome young Jedi in Sith garb. The other Jedi students huddled together like chickens under a hawk, talking among themselves in hushed voices and sipping cautiously at the weakest available drinks. But the Sith moved confidently through the company and was clearly at home. Now he was flirting with Lady Davale, a stunning beauty who had seldom been known to converse with anyone under the rank of earl, and the rhythm of her fan indicated to the Emperor's practiced eye that she was definitely interested in her partner's gallantries. H'mmm--high-born, then, the observer concluded; and he was dressed all in elegant black: a fine silk shirt heavy with the dull glint of gold embroidery, close-fitting breeches tucked into gleaming knee boots, a short cape of rich velvet lined with the subtle complement of watered silk. His fair flesh and bronze shoulder-length hair glowed against the dark color, and the Emperor could tell from the way he carried himself, with an assurance too natural and complete to be called vanity, that he was fully aware of the impression he was creating. The distinctive blue-green and almost oily texture of the liquid in his glass identified it as quivvic--a potent, hideously expensive liquor with an almost burning aftertaste that required a cultivated palate and a strong head. That a Jedi student was drinking quivvic here indicated either supreme self-confidence or foolhardiness; and the young Jedi did not give the impression of being a fool. Not at all.

The longer he studied the Sith Jedi, the more intrigued the Emperor became. At last he came to a decision and sent out a probe, the very lightest feather-touch of the Force, to feel the Sith's shield.

A student should not have been able to detect such a faint probe by an adept with the Emperor's control. Yet the Sith raised his head in a listening pose and quested like a hunting beast on a light scent. He turned and his eyes met the Emperor's; a look of wary interest passed between them. The Emperor caught something like satisfaction, briefly, in the young Jedi's reaction before he turned away.

The Emperor rose, drawing the skirts of his long overrobe together and settling his belt around his hips. The musicians faltered. He waved a dismissal, and they returned to playing. The Emperor stepped down from the dais where his throne stood and drifted slowly, seemingly at random, through the company, which parted and bowed in a slow wave as he passed, like a field of grain in the path of a wind. The protocol droid eased over toward him in response to an almost imperceptible nod. "Confidential voiceprint," he said to it.

"Yes, Majesty."

"Tell us about that young Sith," the Emperor continued as he drew the droid out of earshot of the courtiers.

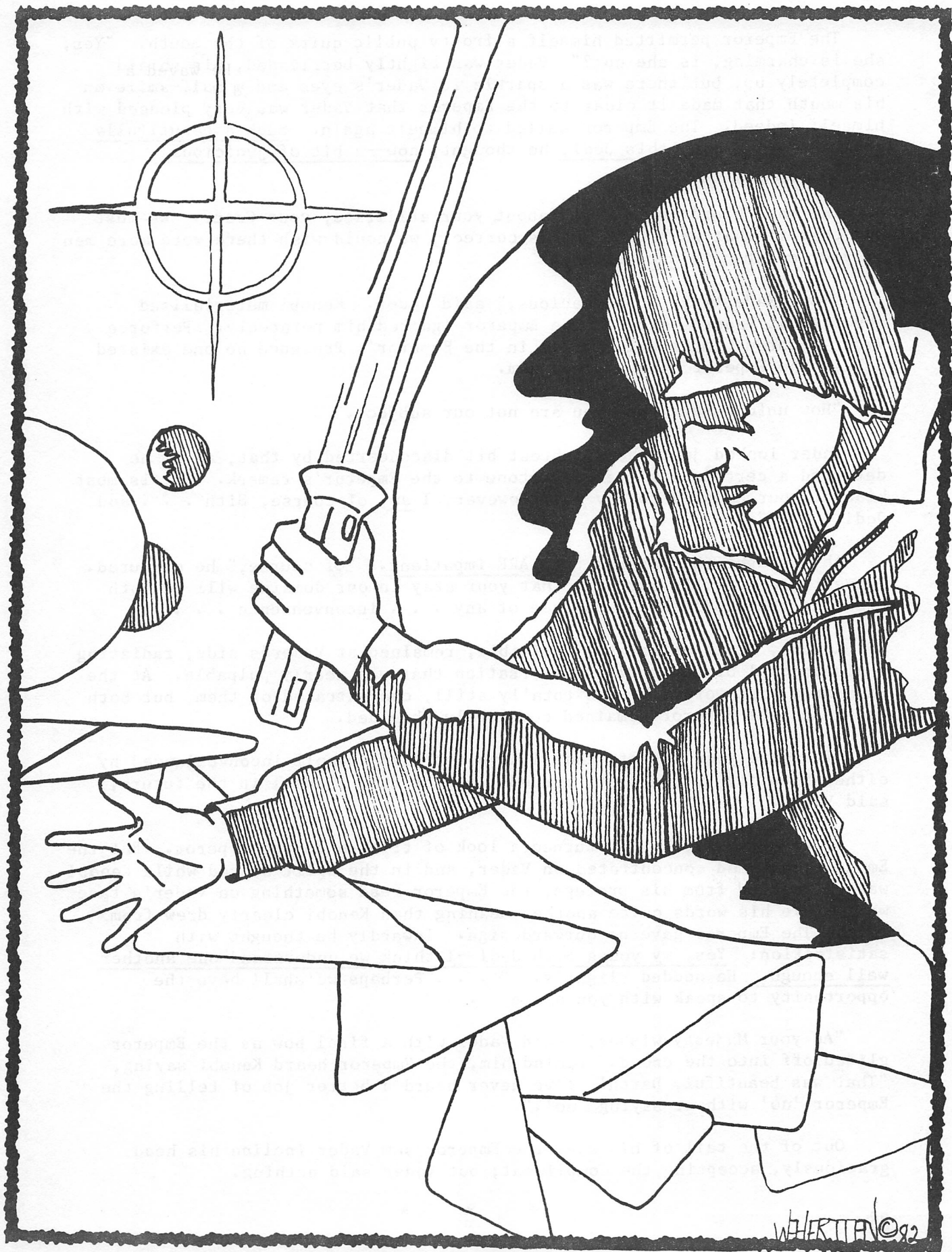
"Only a son of the late Dark Lord of the Sith, formerly Heir, now deposed by his cousin/nineteen and one-half standard years of age/intelligence level fourteen/Force ability level fifteen point five/second-year student, Ruwenjorin Jedi school . . ." The droid droned on while its master listened with half an ear and covertly watched his prey. He would not try a more direct Force probe at this time; it would only antagonize the boy, and the earlier one had shown him that the young Jedi's shield was too strong for anything less--now. But perhaps later . . . The Emperor eyed the level of quivvic in the young man's glass, the teasing expression on Lady Davale's face, and the lord's obvious interest in both. Ah, young Sith, the Emperor thought to himself with a secret smile, yes, you have Force ability few can match, training in Jedi ways, and training in the social graces, even if it was only at that bumpkin court of yours. You are a most accomplished young man--and how well you know it! A worthy prize, no doubt. But you have a young man's hot blood, and between pride and lust, I will have the better of you in due course. I have learned patience since I stood where you stand now. For a moment the Emperor allowed himself to indulge in a bit of harmless and ironic nostalgia: this young Sith reminded the Emperor of his own youth.

The Emperor nodded, cutting off the droid in midsentence, and drifted back into the company. He spoke casually to half a dozen of the Jedi students and arrived finally at the place where Vader stood. Lady Davale curtsied deeply.

"Rise, child," the Emperor said, and nodded dismissal. The lady curtsied to Vader as well and backed out of the Imperial Presence, not without a final melting glance at the young Jedi over the flutter of her fan. Vader's eyes followed her retreat with a calculating interest that suggested he planned to renew the conversation at a later time. Then he turned and bowed to the Emperor; it was a bit less deferential than the Emperor quite approved, but there was no provocation in it.

"We trust that you are enjoying yourself this evening, your . . . Grace." The slightest perceptible pause before the last word let Vader know that the Emperor was aware of both his present and his former status.

"Indeed, your Majesty. The company is--congenial."



The Emperor permitted himself a frosty public quirk of the mouth. "Yes, she is charming, is she not?" Vader was tightly barricaded, his shield completely up, but there was a sparkle in Vader's eyes and a half-smile on his mouth that made it clear to the Emperor that Vader was very pleased with himself indeed. The Emperor smiled to himself again. Such a beautifully arrogant young man, this Jedi, he thought; now--a bit of judicious flattery . . .

"We have heard quite a bit about your abilities, your Grace. We must say that if what we have heard is correct, we could wish there were more men of your caliber in our service."

"Your Majesty is most gracious," said Vader. Kenobi materialized abruptly at Vader's elbow. The Emperor ignored him pointedly. Perforce Vader ignored him as well, since in the Emperor's Presence no one existed unless the Emperor acknowledged him.

"How unfortunate that you are not our subject."

Vader looked just the slightest bit disconcerted by that, as if he detected a certain sinister undertone to the Emperor's remark. "It is most kind of your Majesty to say so. However, I am, of course, Sith . . . and Jedi . . ."

Ah, thought the Emperor, you ARE impatient. "Of course," he murmured. "Nevertheless, it is our hope that your stay in our domains will be both pleasant and profitable, and free of any . . . inconvenience . . ."

Kenobi, still officially invisible, remained at Vader's side, radiating a disapproval of the entire conversation that was nearly palpable. At the Emperor's last words, he was totally still, concentrated on them, but both Vader and the Emperor remained completely shielded.

"I assure your Majesty that I have not found myself inconvenienced by either identity in the past, nor do I expect that I shall in the future," said Vader.

At these words, Kenobi turned a look of triumph on the Emperor. But the Emperor remained concentrated on Vader, and in the split second while Kenobi was distracted from his protege, the Emperor read something on Vader's face which gave his words quite another meaning than Kenobi clearly drew from them. The Emperor gave no outward sign. Inwardly he thought with satisfaction: Yes, my young Sith Jedi--I think we understand one another well enough. He nodded slightly. ". . . Perhaps we shall have the opportunity to speak with you again . . ."

"As your Majesty wishes," said Vader with a final bow as the Emperor glided off into the crowd. Behind him, the Emperor heard Kenobi saying, "That was beautiful, Darth! I've never heard a better job of telling the Emperor 'no' without saying 'no'."

Out of the tail of his eye, the Emperor saw Vader incline his head graciously, accepting the compliment; but Vader said nothing.

* * *

It was quite late when the tired and subdued Jedi returned to Ruwenjorin. As they scattered thankfully to their beds, Kenobi laid a hand on Vader's arm and drew him aside, saying, "I'd like to talk to you, Darth."

They retired to Kenobi's office, and he switched on the sounddampers as Vader settled into the chair. Vader was not quite drunk, not really, he told himself; but several glasses of quivvic over the evening combined with a lively session in Lady Davale's apartments shortly before he left the palace had unquestionably blunted the sharp edge of his mental state. Vader leaned back comfortably, savoring his generalized feeling of somewhat fuzzy contentment. He wondered if it might not be wise to wait until the morning before having any kind of meaningful conversation with Kenobi, but in his current state he could think of no way to suggest this properly and could not bring himself to worry about it.

Kenobi leaned back also, steeping his fingers against his chin, a half-smile on his mouth. "You put your training to good use tonight. That was an excellent bit of diplomacy, that conversation with the Emperor."

"Yes."

If Kenobi felt any annoyance at the lack of a "thank you," it did not show. "I've been hoping to talk with you about this for some time, Darth, but I had to be sure where your loyalties lay first. I think that's quite clear after tonight."

"I am Jedi. Surely there has never been any question of that."

"No, of course not." Kenobi sat up, adjusted himself in the chair, and cleared his throat. "I'm sure you are aware, Darth, that there has been friction between the Order and the Empire recently--engineered riots, propaganda against the Order, that sort of thing. It looks as though the Empire may be moving into a new phase in its harassment. Some of the upper-level masters--"

"--feel it is time to do something concrete to defend the Order and prevent Imperial encroachment on its prerogatives," finished Vader, rather pleased to find such a phrase slipping so easily off his tongue.

"Exactly!" said Kenobi. "How did you know--or was that a guess?"

Vader shrugged. "It's obvious. Any fool can see it is a political necessity."

"Let's hope it isn't quite as obvious to the Emperor as it is to you," said Kenobi. He lowered his voice in spite of the sounddampers. "Many of us feel that the most effective way to defend the Jedi is to work with the Senate for the restoration of the Republic. There are a number of sympathetic people there who--" He got no further before Vader interrupted.

"No." Vader did not raise his voice, and it took a moment for the negative to register on Kenobi. "No," Vader repeated with an expansive wave of his hand. "The Republic is dead and gone; its time is past. The Empire is more efficient. It is far easier to control one man than a hundred."

Kenobi recoiled with a look of horror on his face. "How can you possibly say that, Darth? Have you no concept of what a Jedi is? We have been the guardians of peace and justice for all the peoples of the galaxy for generations. How can you possibly support a tyranny that denies those peoples their most basic freedoms, their very rights as intelligent beings? You cannot be a Jedi and support the Empire! Has what I taught you meant nothing to you?"

Between the quivvic and his fatigue, some perverse spirit had taken control of Vader's mouth, and he found himself saying, "Why should I care about the commons of the Empire? They are not my people."

It took a moment for Kenobi to understand what Vader meant, then he said, "But it's all part of the same thing, Darth. The Empire is as much a threat to Sith as it is to the other star systems. You know it has been trying to take over the Sith Worlds ever since the first Palpatine took control; the Empire will not accept any independent power--Jedi, Sith, anything. If we don't stop it, eventually the Sith will be just another conquered province, and her people will suffer as much as any of the other people of the galaxy. You remember your history: the Republic was peaceful; the Republic never threatened Sith."

Vader gave a bark of laughter. "There is an old proverb in Sith: 'The luthra and the luthra-hawk signed a treaty of alliance, but when the hawk grew hungry, he had a good meal.' I believe the good intentions of the Republic no more than those of the Empire. But the Empire I can use." Kenobi stood up and began pacing in an agitated fashion as Vader continued, "I have no wish to hurt you, Master Kenobi; you are in no danger from what you have told me. But I will not be dragged into an internal struggle of the Empire, a struggle I don't believe in."

"Do you believe in anything?" Kenobi said bitterly.

"I believe in myself. In Sith. In the Jedi. I do not believe in foolish dreams of a Republic which is gone forever. It serves no purpose to pursue them."

"I had hoped that living here at Ruwenjorin you would learn to step outside of your narrow provincial alliance to your home system," said Kenobi sadly, "to see that all intelligent beings are brothers in the Force, that all are worthy of our loyalty and concern. The Jedi are universal, Darth. We belong to all beings: noble or common, our own species or others. When you have truly come to be a Jedi, you will understand that."

Vader's face wore an expression verging on contempt. "No doubt, Master Kenobi," he said politely, dismissing the words.

"Don't humor me," Darth."

Vader lowered his head slightly, acknowledging the rebuke rather than accepting it. He was not paying much attention to what Kenobi was saying at this point; all he was really aware of was an overwhelming desire to go back to his room and fall asleep. He yawned and settled into a corner of the chair like a sleepy little boy.

Kenobi stopped pacing and studied him. The anger on Kenobi's face faded, to be replaced slowly by a gentle smile. "It will come to you in time, son. When you have more experience in the Force, you will be able to feel it, I know." He paused. "Go to bed, Darth. You'll feel better in the morning."

Vader climbed to his feet and headed for the door to Kenobi's office, walking very carefully.



Seller glumly watched the holochess board, where the last of his defending chessmen was being dismembered by one of his opponent's toothy little horrors.

"That's 632 to 586," Naalic informed him cheerfully. "You owe me sixty-five credits."

Seller grunted.

"Yup," Naalic went on, "I think that we've hit the record for 'most consecutive holochess games played by a personal guard team while supposedly on duty.' Shall I patch the city central 'puter and find out for sure?"

"Stuff it," Seller replied without heat. The tail of his chess piece disappeared down the other little monster's throat, and the guardsman shut off the board.

"What's the matter?" Naalic teased. "His Highness is perfectly safe; we've got good chow, regular hours, and nobody gunning for us. Life is great!" Naalic stretched out his legs under the chess table and put his hands behind his head.

Naalic hadn't expected an answer; Seller still responded to most of his chatter with monosyllabic sounds. But this time the other guardsman seemed to have reached his limit. He smashed his fist down on the table, stood up, and said, "Eighteen months! If we don't get some action, I'm going to go nuts!"

"I know what you mean. It's so quiet around here, sometimes I think I'm going to curl up in a corner and start talking to the wall." Naalic chuckled. "Well, they say you don't have to worry until you start getting answers back from the wall, though that might be sort of interesting: 'Hi, I'm a wall, and--'"

Seller gave him a look of pure disgust. "I want to go home," he said so softly Naalic could barely hear him.

Naalic sobered. "'Until death take me, or my lord release me, or the world end'," he quoted quietly.

Seller just stared at him levelly, and after a minute Naalic dropped his eyes. That had been unfair; Naalic knew perfectly well the depths of

Seller's devotion to the Dark Lord and his oath. "I know, I know," he said. "We both want to go home. It would be different if I felt like we were doing any good here, but all we do is sit around twiddling our thumbs. I feel useless. Still," he added, "if it came right down to it, I'll bet not one of those little two-for-a-quarter-credit Jedi could find his left foot with both hands, let alone figure out which end of a blaster is which. If his Highness ever does need somebody--"

Seller nodded agreement.

"So here we stay until his Highness decides to leave." Naalic's good-humor returned. "Relax, Seller. Are you really in a hurry to go back to getting shot at by Koric's troops?"

But Seller seemed to have exhausted his conversational resources, and remained silent. "Shall I set 'em up one last time?" Naalic asked. Seller shrugged, and Naalic reached for the board control. The door chimed and Naalic looked up. "Maybe that's your action."

Seller's grunt was eloquently dubious.

"No, you're right. Who can it be at this hour anyway? Maybe it's that little girl from Madame Morin's down in the village. You calling for take-out service now, Seller?" Naalic got up and walked over to open the door as Seller resumed his seat. The door opened on a small, inoffensive-looking felinoid with dull fur and ragged whiskers. He was clutching a battered sample case defensively to his thorax. "May I come in please, gentlebeings?" he said.

"Maybe he's selling drugs," said Naalic over his shoulder. He studied the felinoid. "Oh, all right; you look harmless. Come on in."

The felinoid stepped into the shadow of the door, where he was hidden from view by Naalic's body, and made the universal sign of touching his thumb and forefinger together and holding them up in a circle around his left eye.

"No, we're not bugged," Naalic answered, puzzled.

The felinoid stepped into the room, shut the door, and dropped his deferential air. "I come from his Imperial Majesty."

The two Sith looked at each other and burst into a roar of laughter. "And I'm the Dark Lord of the Sith," Naalic said. "What kind of stuff are you selling, cat? It must be good."

The felinoid's ears went back. "Do you think his Majesty is stupid enough to pick an agent who looks like an agent? Do you think this is a holovision show? Only a Sith--" He stopped and the fur on his ruff slowly lay back down as he recovered himself.

"He's right, you know," said Naalic, with a half smile at Seller. "What kind of proof can you give us, and what would the Emperor want with us anyway?"

The felinoid walked over to the 'puter outlet sitting in plain view on the tape shelf, and keyed it.

"Central," it responded.

"Central, identify this voiceprint."

"Kytheronaha/planet origin Corlis/species feline/sex male/age . . . "

"Stop. Is this being an agent of Imperial intelligence?"

"Classified."

"Override. My authority."

"Yes, subject is Imperial agent."

The felinoid unkeyed the outlet and turned to the two Sith. "Does that satisfy you?"

"That could be faked," Naalic said.

"It could. But I have no reason to deceive you, and I'm afraid you're going to have to trust me if you want to help your master, the Sith lord."

Seller's hand strayed to the butt of his blaster and he growled, "What do you want with his Highness?"

"I don't want anything with him. His Imperial Majesty wants to see him as soon as possible, in private, and without the Jedi knowing about it."

"Why is it so secret?" Naalic asked. "How do we know it isn't some kind of a trap? Koric--"

"Don't be ridiculous!" snapped the felinoid. "His Imperial Majesty has no interest in the petty squabbles of your system. If he intended your lord harm, he wouldn't send out an agent. He'd send a squad of troopers, and there wouldn't be a thing you could do about it. He wants to see the Sith lord privately--right away. He didn't tell me why. Go fetch him."

Seller bristled. "Why, you--"

Naalic stopped him. "Do we have any guarantees of his Highness's safety?"

"I will be your hostage, and you are welcome to accompany him."

The two Sith exchanged a long, measuring look. "We don't have much choice," Naalic said at last.

"I'll go," said Seller. He checked the charge in his blaster, settled his dagger in its sheath, and stepped outside into the warm summer night. He stretched casually and strolled slowly away from the door, the picture of an innocent, bored man taking a random walk for exercise. He nodded to the

Jedi doorward across the narrow courtyard from the guest house as he passed, and the 'ward replied with a half-wave of recognition as Seller rounded the corner of the low wall surrounding the school. As long as he did not try to enter, the Jedi ignored him; they had no interest in the stranded Sith guardsmen who had spent eighteen months cooling their heels uselessly in the guest house.

Once out of sight of the 'ward, Seller's casual attitude vanished and he melted into the shadow of the wall. With a part of his mind, he noted the soft damp air, heavy with the scent of flowers. It was very dark. The Old Quarter was poor and secretive, and here the bright lights of the city's center were reduced to a soft glow against the horizon, nearly lost behind the surrounding buildings. The sleepy sound of night birds churckling in the shrubbery came to him, and he was pleased that their chattering covered the sound of his footsteps.

He arrived at the wall opposite his lord's sleeping area and breathed a quick thanks to the Sith gods that his Highness had graduated from the novice dormitory to a Second's private room. Seller had little trouble finding hand- and footholds in the crumbling old wall, and dropped lightly to the courtyard on the other side. He froze, listening, but there was no sign that anyone had heard, and no stirring from within the building. Its windows were open in the warmth, Seller noted, and he moved quickly and quietly to the ground outside his lord's room. The soaked grass was cold under the knee of his breeches as he crouched there.

"Your Highness?" he subvocalized, projecting as strongly and directly as he could. Seller had no trace of Force-ability, but he had learned to communicate with Vader in this way, though it still made him uneasy that Vader could pick up his thoughts. There was no response from within. Seller frowned; usually such a call would have brought Vader awake and alert at once. Is this the right room? Seller asked himself nervously, and risked a look over the sill.

It was the right room. The usually fastidious Dark Lord lay sprawled on his back across his bunk, innocent of garments or bedclothes, snoring softly. His boots lay helter-skelter on the floor and his rich festal-clothes were flung haphazardly over the desk and chair. That must have been some party, Seller thought, smiling to himself. He had not seen his Highness in this state since the night of his Highness's coronation feast. . . .

Seller pulled himself up over the chest-high window ledge and slid noiselessly into the bedroom. Crossing to the bed, he whispered, "Your Highness?" That got no response either. Seller stood there in indecision: any louder and the students in the surrounding rooms would surely hear through the open windows and wake also. How was he to wake his Highness without shaking him, touching him? Seller looked down at the Dark Lord, lying vulnerable and unaware in sleep.

This was his lord, his Highness, Lord Vader of Vader, as much beyond him as . . . It was not proper, it was not possible, that he should . . . touch . . . his lord, but he had no choice. Tentatively, greatly daring,

Seller reached out and put his hand lightly on the shoulder of the sleeping Dark Lord.

Only Seller's trained guardsman's reflexes saved him from Vader's startled, defensive swing as the Dark Lord woke suddenly. Seller found himself frozen in a Force-paralysis as the groggy Vader sat up abruptly, shaking his head to clear it, and identified his guardsman. Vader released him. "Seller?"

Seller went down on one knee, hot with shame, and bent his head. Would his Highness resent, would his Highness punish, the dreadful presumption of laying a hand upon his Highness's person? "Forgive me for intruding on your Highness like this."

"What is it?"

"There's a felinoid over at the guest house, your Highness. Claims he comes from the Emperor and that the Emperor was asking to see your Highness. The central 'puter identifies this cat positively as an Imperial agent." Seller shrugged. "For whatever that's worth."

"Very good," Vader answered with a small, self-satisfied smile. He stood up with no sign of self-consciousness, totally at ease in front of his guardsman, and calmly gestured Seller to rise.

There would be, Seller knew, no more direct acknowledgement of his incautious touch; it was utterly beneath his Highness to take notice of it.

"Informal dress," Vader said in his guardsman's direction. Slipping back into his familiar role, Seller went to the closet, pulled out a plain linen shirt and cloth breeches, helped Vader into them, then knelt to pull on Vader's boots. It seemed strange and shocking to Seller that his lord had no gentlemen of the bedchamber here at Ruwenjorin. Seller reflected that when he, Seller, was not here, his Highness must actually have to dress himself! Seller thought that he would be glad to be gone from this barbarous place and back to the civilization of the Sith Worlds.

Vader clipped his lightsaber to his belt, allowed Seller to fasten his cape, and turned toward the door. "Your pardon, your Highness," said Seller, "but the cat says the Emperor wants this meeting to be secret."

"Excellent. Come." Vader opened the door to his room, and with a mental shrug, Seller followed his lord into the passageway. If his Highness thought it was safe to walk right through the center of the Jedi school, Seller had no right to question his Highness.

They encountered no one in the halls at this hour, and passed only a few closed doors with the light showing under the sill, and a lone cleaning robot which ignored them. When they came to the outer courtyard, Vader took note of the doorward standing with his back to them, then raised his hand and gestured. They walked past with no reaction on the part of the 'ward, and Seller realized that this must be a new Jedi technique his Highness had learned here at Ruwenjorin to make them effectively invisible to anyone with

less power in the Force than his Highness had. Neat trick, thought Seller. That should come in handy back in Sith. . . .

Vader didn't bother to look back, but strode on unconcernedly toward the guest house, as Seller gave the glassy-eyed 'ward a sideways glance and hurried to follow. No matter how convincingly he told himself that use of the Force was perfectly natural, no more "wizardry" than any other phenomenon of the physical world, it still made him nervous. He tried to hide it from his lord, but he knew it was depressingly obvious to his Highness. His Highness seemed to be subtly amused by the whole thing, and Seller had occasionally had the unworthy thought that perhaps his lord had chosen his guardsmen without Force-ability just for that extra edge of awe their lack brought him. He stifled the thought. It wouldn't do for his Highness to catch him with that in his mind; it wasn't respectful.



Not long after, an unobtrusive civilian groundcar pulled up at the Palace and discharged Vader, the felinoid, and the two guards. The Imperial at the door acknowledged the felinoid's identification and passed them, and he led the little party through a tortuous series of back hallways to a private room in the royal living quarters. The felinoid keyed the scanner set into the wall beside the door.

"Yes?" answered the familiar voice of the Emperor.

"Kytheronaha, your Imperial Majesty. I have the Sith."

"Very good. Scan him and send him in."

Vader submitted to the scan, which revealed no weapon except his lightsaber. The felinoid moved as if to remove it. Vader glared at him and the felinoid drew back.

"Your Majesty, the Sith refuses to release the lightsaber," Kytheronaha said into the scanner.

"So we see." Amusement filtered through the mechanical voice transmission. "It's all right; we doubt he will try to assassinate us with the saber. Send him in, Kytheronaha."

"Your Majesty." The felinoid gave Vader a last disdainful look and keyed the release pattern for the door. The Emperor matched it from within, and the thick metal slab slid silently back. Vader stepped confidently in and his guards moved to follow, but the door slid shut again before they could enter. The sounddamper cut in with a soft sighing noise.

Vader found himself in a luxurious small room. Muffling carpet covered the floor, soft as moss, and dull blue draperies gave the animated holos on the wall the appearance of windows. The Emperor stood, quite alone, with an arm resting casually on what gave every evidence of being a freestanding

sculpture made of flowing water, yet apparently was completely solid. Vader refused to let the anomaly distract him. He stepped forward and bowed slightly. "Your Majesty wished to see me?"

The Emperor flicked the flowing grey sleeve of his undress chamberrobe aside, turned away from the sculpture, and took a step to the buffet built into the paneled wall. He lifted a crystal decanter and poured two goblets of blue-green liquid, took one for himself, then turned back to Vader. With the thin ghost of a smile, he held out the glass. "You were drinking quivvic this evening, if we recall, your Grace.

Vader was aware that his aura was still slightly blurred, his defenses reduced, by the remaining quivvic in his system. He accepted the glass, barely touched it to his mouth, then moved over and set it down on the end of the buffet. The Emperor watched him coolly over the rim of his own glass as he took a sip of the quivvic. He seemed pleased, as if Vader had demonstrated something to his satisfaction--prudence and caution, perhaps.

"Your Majesty had some purpose, no doubt, in requesting my attendance this evening," said Vader. He left no doubt that his presence was a gracious gesture rather than obedience to the Emperor's command.

"Be seated, your Grace. No ceremony." The Emperor took a seat, waved Vader to a tall overstuffed chair with almost the look of a throne, next to the buffet. Vader bowed again slightly and sat, crossing his legs with complete self-possession.

The Emperor leaned back. "I had intended to speak to you earlier this evening. Kenobi is a most efficient watchdog."

Vader noted the change from the Imperial plural to the singular and waited expectantly. Such informality was encouraging.

"I will be frank with you. I need a Jedi."

"I am sure your Majesty should have no difficulty in finding one," said Vader, fencing.

The Emperor gave him the faintest of warning frowns, and continued. "So many of our native Jedi are unfortunately infatuated with the outmoded inefficiencies of the late Republic. Like Kenobi. Such people in positions of power can be dangerous--both to themselves and to those . . . unfortunate . . . followers whom they mislead with their foolish clinging to an idealized past which never existed." The Emperor twirled his wine glass slowly between his fingers, admiring the way the light caught the cut crystal. "You, however, are Sith. I presume your loyalties are Sith as well?"

Vader could feel the Emperor's controlled presence on the fringe of his aura; it was not overt enough to be called a probe, not pressing enough to permit him to resent it, but it would allow the Emperor to tell quite easily whether he responded truthfully or not. "Yes," he said simply.

The Emperor nodded slightly, still not looking directly at his guest.

In an apparently indifferent tone, he murmured, "I am informed that there is considerable unrest in Sith since your cousin took control. Koric has suggested to me that it might be necessary for the Empire to offer him some assistance to help restore order." He took another sip of quivvic and fixed Vader with a look. "So far I have resisted responding to such a request. It would be inconvenient to commit the Empire to a long-term intervention in an independent system."

"I certainly hope that will not be necessary, your Majesty."

"Of course," the Emperor mused, "it might not be necessary if there were a Dark Lord of the ruling family--or his viceroy--with enough energy to correct the situation, whose interests corresponded with those of the Empire--"

That's certainly clear enough, thought Vader. He shifted, recrossed his legs in the other direction, toward the Emperor. The Emperor could read the gesture, combined with his aura, Vader knew. Exactly as he had hoped; it could scarcely have been better. His satisfaction was obvious to both of them in his very posture, hardly needing confirmation in the Force. There were, however, some minor matters which needed clarification.

"I am, as your Majesty says, Sith," Vader said carefully. "And Jedi . . . ?" There was a faint question in the last word.

"As I said, I need a Jedi."

"I have, of course, committed myself to the Order . . . "

"Ah!" The Emperor leaned forward suddenly, and Vader had the unsettling impression of a snake about to strike. "There, if you will forgive me, your Grace, you are mistaken. You did not commit yourself. You were committed."

Vader was disconcerted by the unexplained turn.

"I have Read you," said the Emperor. "Ah--you did not think anyone could do that when your barriers were up, did you?" He chuckled. "You were a bit indiscreet this evening. Did you think the lady's rooms were Force-shielded?"

Vader stirred angrily, half-rose from his chair.

"Be still!" The Emperor's voice held a new note of command. Vader bridled but subsided. "Surely you, as a Sith, should know that there are other methods of control in the Force than the Jedi Way. I am an Adept; we do not fear the Dark Side, and there is much power in it." The Emperor studied his wine glass again and said idly, "Do you fear the Dark Side, your Grace?"

"I fear nothing!" snapped Vader with an arrogant lift of his chin.

"Good. Very good. It may be you are even more valuable than I anticipated. You have been searching for something more than the Jedi Way

Kenobi teaches, have you not? Unauthorized experiments in the Force, perhaps?"

"Yes," said Vader, subdued.

"I know there is that in you which is already akin to the Dark Side. It spoke to me earlier. With the Dark Side you will be greater than any Jedi living." The Emperor watched Vader carefully. "I can give you what you want."

"And that is, your Majesty?"

"Power. Absolute power subordinate only to mine. Power to rule Sith as you wish; power to rule in the Empire as my deputy. The power of the Dark Side. You are strong enough to use it, if you have the courage to take it."

"I have," said Vader thickly. His face was flushed and there was an almost drugged look about him. He recovered slightly. "But, your Majesty, the Jedi--"

"Did you not hear me say that you were committed to the Jedi? Did you think you came to them of your own will?"

"Certainly. I have always wanted to be a Jedi."

"Have you?" said the Emperor, raising his eyebrows. "Your Grace, Kenobi laid a geas on you. You were manipulated."

"No!" Vader said, outraged.

"Search your feelings," the Emperor continued calmly. "It is true. If you will allow, I will remove the geas."

Long-buried thoughts came back to Vader: his father's warning against the Jedi; Catryn's words, "He wants you so bad he can taste it." Could it possibly be true that Kenobi had actually tampered with his mind? He did not want to believe it, but the more he turned the idea over in his mind, remembering things which had formerly puzzled him, that fit no pattern, the more it took on a horrible plausibility. He felt a sense of anger and humiliation; that Vader should be manipulated like the commonest layman was beyond enduring. And yet, he wondered uneasily, how could he trust the Emperor? He had no illusion that the Emperor was a disinterested party; the Emperor wanted him just as Kenobi wanted him. He was trapped between uncertainties.

The Emperor was watching him, and Vader realized that, in his shock, he had left himself completely unshielded. "Will you rather trust Kenobi if I can show you that what I have said is true?" asked the Emperor. He chuckled softly. "You have nothing to fear from me, your Grace; you are far too valuable to me for me to damage you. I will set you free of Kenobi, and you can decide if that is worth your allegiance. I want your willing service; you will make a far better liege man than slave, for my purposes."

"As your Majesty wishes," Vader said through clenched teeth.

"Look here and concentrate," the Emperor said. "I need a focus." Vader stared at the wine glass in the Emperor's hand, letting his shield go down completely. The crystal diffused, filled his consciousness, and he swam in a luminous fishbowl, weightless and unthinking, in a globe of sparkling hard clearness and blue-green.

Vader felt the Emperor's entry on the edge of his consciousness, his slow progress into Vader's mind. It required all of Vader's control not to resist the invasion. This careful investigation was far more than a probe. The touch was like the tickle of an animal's whiskers against his face, like the crawling of an insect across his hand: soft, insinuating, irritating.

The Emperor reached the center, his touch firmer now. There was a block there, one Vader had not even realized existed. It threw back the Emperor's mental focus like a mirror's reflecting surface, almost perfectly camouflaged from the Dark Lord's own identification, but clear to the investigator. The Emperor probed it carefully, examined it, and with a sudden application of mental force, like the shattering of a mirror, cracked open the protective defense, revealing the aura of the command and its substance. Kenobi. There could be no faintest doubt; the origin of the geas bore Kenobi's distinctive identity, and the command was--loyalty to the Jedi, loyalty to Kenobi: an alien presence, controlling, manipulating.

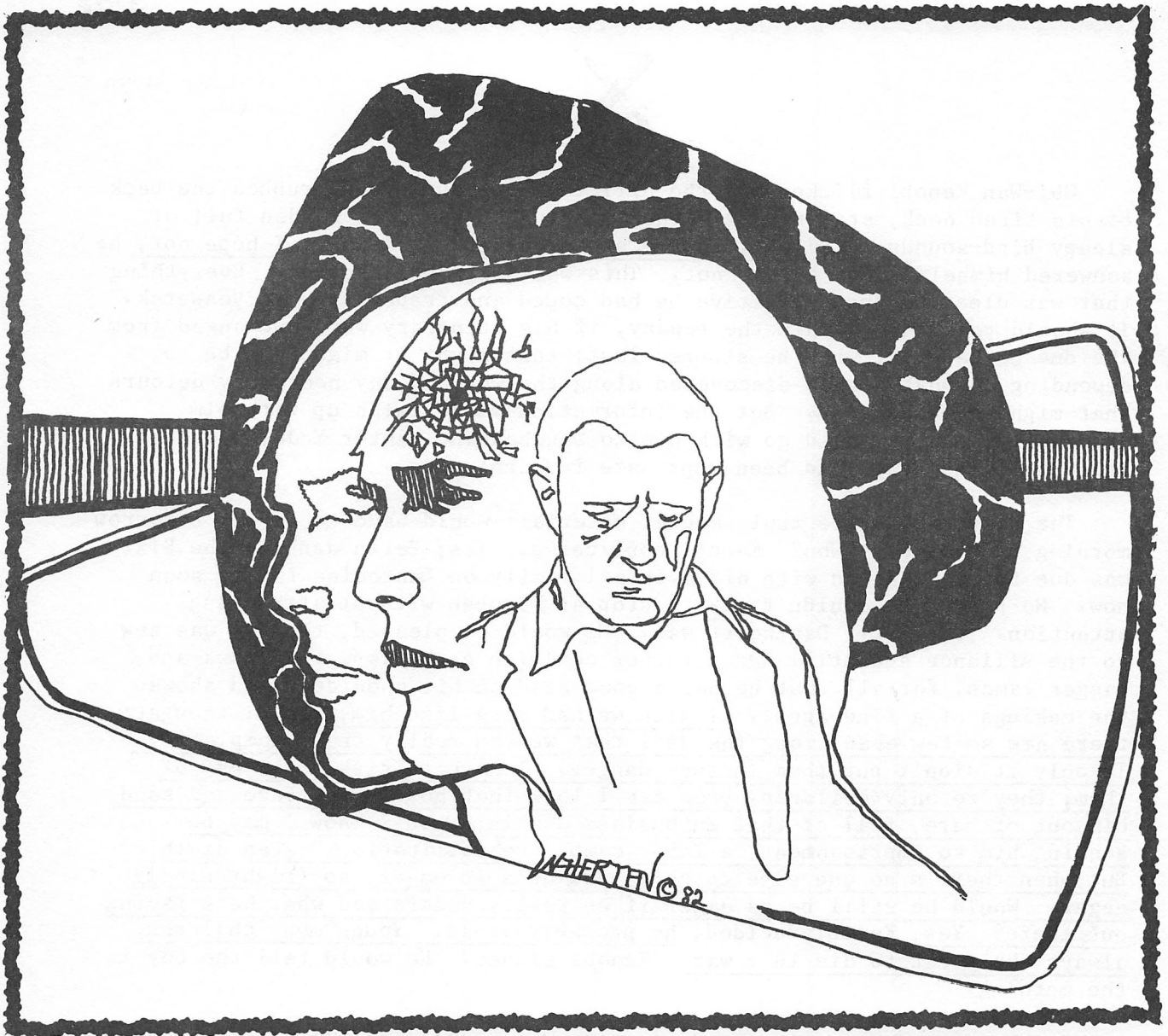
In a reflexive explosion as violent and automatic as a sneeze, Vader responded, thrusting the alien identity out of his mind, and the Emperor withdrew with it.

Vader found himself on his feet, fist clenched around his lightsaber, in a fighting stance, wild with anger--cold, deadly, reason-deadening, absolute fury--at the outrageous indignity of this mental violation. He was panting. Gradually his breathing eased a little and his grip unclenched slightly, as he thought, How could I have based my life on loyalty to the Jedi, I, the Heir of Sith? The Jedi, the Jedi Way, is a tool. One does not feel loyalty to a TOOL. I am a Jedi and remain a Jedi; the Jedi Way is full of power and I can use it still. The Jedi also: those who will accept rule, I can use. The others are dangerous, deviant foci for power which threatens mine, which must be removed.

The Emperor sat watching Vader, satisfied. A small smile played around the corners of his mouth. "Well, your Grace," he said in a voice as soft and smooth as cream, "do I have a Jedi?"

"Yes, your Majesty," Vader answered, and his tone was controlled and deadly cold. "I am entirely at your Majesty's service, as soon as some unfinished business of mine is concluded at Ruwenjorin." He slid his hand down the grip of his saber with a savage, sensual pleasure, clipped it to his belt again, and faced the Emperor. "Your Majesty would not deny my honor satisfaction?"

"No, indeed, your Grace," the Emperor answered. "You have our leave to go."



Vader nodded grimly, bowed to his new lord, and turned to go. As the door slid shut behind Vader, the Emperor sat tapping the tips of his fingers together absently, considering. He murmured, "My thanks, Kenobi, my old enemy. That is a fine sword you have forged for me, that Sith blade: good metal and a keen edge, well tempered. A tendency to turn in your hand and cut you, yes, unless your grip is sure. But I have a good hold on it now. That one is mine. If he survives."

The Emperor reached out and touched a control set in the wall near his chair. "Colonel Bannes: a squad of troopers and a med unit at once."

"Yes, your Majesty," a tinny voice answered from the palace security office. There was the muffled sound of the order being relayed down the chain of command. "Where shall I send them, your Majesty?"

"Ruwenjorin," the Emperor said.



Obi-Wan Kenobi flicked off the office 'puter outlet and rubbed the back of his tired neck, staring out without seeing at the dark garden full of sleepy bird-sounds. Calm before the storm? he asked himself; I hope not, he answered himself. No, surely not. This was just a precaution. Everything that was clear of just sensitive he had coded and transmitted to Vesserek. It should reach him within the tenday, if his itinerary were unchanged from the one he had left when he stopped last; that might or might not be so, depending on what he had discovered along the way and any necessary detours that might have come up. But the information would catch up with him eventually, and it would go with him to Dagobah and Master Yoda, where the records of the Order had been kept safe for centuries.

The rest of it--the truly secret material--would have to go out tomorrow morning by courier. Who? Kenobi considered. Yes; Petta danLuq, the Sixth, was due for a vacation with his mythical family on Dantooine fairly soon now. No reason he couldn't make a stop at Dagobah without attracting attention. Perfect. DanLuq it was. He would be pleased; the boy was new to the Alliance and still had a rather childish enthusiasm for cloak-and-dagger games, for all that he had a good head on his shoulders and showed the makings of a fine agent. I wish we had more like him, Kenobi thought; there are so few even among the Jedi that we can really trust completely. If only it didn't put them in such danger. I hate to risk them, any of them; they're only children. How can I look that boy in the face and send him out of here, full of that enthusiasm of his, when I know I may be sending him to imprisonment, a labor camp, "rehabilitation," even death? But when there's no one else to go-- And he's so eager, so frighteningly eager. Would he still be as eager if he really understood what he's facing out there? Yes, Kenobi decided, he probably would. Young men, children; always the first to die in a war. Kenobi sighed. He would tell the boy in the morning.

Obi-Wan sat for a moment enjoying the damp, alive smell of the air from the garden outside. The danger seemed absurd, a paranoid fantasy, in this peaceful moment. Darth had showed no signs of actually doing anything, and he had been drinking. Perhaps it was alarmist to doubt him; perhaps, still, with a little more effort he could be turned to the Alliance. There was so much potential in him that it could not be wasted and lost to the cause. Ridiculous--Darth was no Imperial! He was just confused. Darth had been his since he was six years old, when the conditioning had been imprinted on him. That was too deeply embedded by now for anyone but a Jedi master to detect. No, the conditioning was safe--and Darth was safe. It must be a false alarm. No doubt it would all look very silly in the morning.

He rose, put out the lights, and walked slowly back toward his sleeping quarters. It was very late and the third moon was dipping toward the horizon. Kenobi yawned. As he walked along the dormitory corridors, he reached out mentally and touched each of the sleeping students' minds, like a father tucking his children into bed with a little pat: a light, brushing touch in passing, reading calm sleep, restlessness, any hint of unease about

an aura. Once or twice he found unhappy dreams, and eased the troubled spirit into sounder sleep.

He passed Vader's room, half-asleep himself now, and reached out to stroke that beloved mind, to assure himself that he was correct in dismissing what had happened this evening. There was nothing there.

Startled into complete wakefulness, Kenobi probed again, hurriedly. Surely he had been mistaken. No. The room was empty! A cold lump formed in Kenobi's belly. If Darth were gone, where could he be? In a futile gesture, he opened the door and checked the Sith's room. The bedcovering was slightly disturbed. Darth had lain down at least, and the clothes he had worn to the reception were thrown across the desk. It looked as if he had intended to go to bed. Had he been kidnapped somehow? But if so, there would be signs of a struggle, surely, and Kenobi doubted that any non-Jedi, even one of Koric's Sith, could have penetrated the school undetected, with that hostile a purpose influencing his aura, or have overcome the Dark Lord with no evidence of a battle. Kidnapping was most unlikely. Then where had he gone--and why? A horrible suspicion began to take shape in Kenobi's mind, one he fervently hoped was false.

He sank down on the bed and gathered himself for the difficult and exhausting effort of tracing an aura in the Force. A major disturbance could be detected parsecs away, but a single individual was hard to follow, and if he had gone offplanet or made a jump through hyperspace, it would be almost impossible.

Kenobi blanked his mind and focused, sending his consciousness outward to make contact with the aura of the Sith which was still strongly present in the room filled with his things. Obi-Wan concentrated, slowly bringing his own aura into resonance with his student's, merging, absorbing the pattern, linking with Vader's identity. When he was in unity with it, he began casting for the missing Jedi. Almost without conscious thought, keeping positive effort to a minimum to reduce the interference of his personality on Vader's frequency, Kenobi followed the faint tremor left by Vader in the Force. There were other presences there: the two guards the Dark Lord had brought with him from Sith, and an anonymous, fuzzy identity he had never felt before and could not identify. Kenobi ignored them, concentrating on the thin, bright trail of his student.

Kenobi moved through the strange Force-analogy of the city: dark blocks of dead matter, the buildings, looming against the faintest background glow of the all-pervasive Force like deserted streets in the early hours of predawn. Through the empty areas flickered intelligences which his mind saw as varicolored smudges of light, brighter or darker according to the power in the Force, each species and each aura different.

The Vader-aura was closer now--he had almost found it. But his following was blocked by a barrier. It was strong and burning cold, like frozen metal; cold enough and empty enough to suck in all life, to drink him in, like the soundless, lightless pull of a black hole, absorbing everything in its hunger. The Emperor. It was the palace, heavy with the dark Imperial aura, and Vader was there, within it. Unprotesting. Vader's aura was in unity with the Emperor's, absorbed into the Emperor's influence.

Kenobi drew back quickly. There was more power there than he could defeat or penetrate now, tired and disheartened as he was. He cursed himself for a fool; self-indulgent, willfully blind. How could he ever have assumed that Vader would do nothing?

The icy lump in his belly had spread. He was shivering with cold in the warm room, feeling hollow and light-headed, almost feverish. There was no more possibility of deluding himself. Darth had gone over to the Emperor. Darth was lost to him: the boy he had pinned his hopes on for thirteen years. Kenobi stood and walked to the door, moving slowly as if he were brittle and any sudden movement might break him into pieces.

. . . Petta. Kenobi gradually concentrated on one thought among the whirling confusion. Petta. He must send the courier at once, before morning, now. He grasped at the concrete action, and moved down the corridor toward the boy's room.

His mental call awoke the Sixth, and Petta appeared, heavy-eyed and disheveled, at his door, where he stood wearing a worried look and stuffing his shirt into his pants with uncoordinated, sleepy lunges, as Kenobi came up. "Master Kenobi?"

"I must have a courier, Petta--right away, tonight. It may be dangerous. Are you willing to go?"

Petta took in Kenobi's distracted air and swallowed his questions. "Of course. I'll get my boots."

Kenobi waited impatiently as the young man pulled them on. He gave Petta hurried instructions on the way back to his office, where he pressed a false I.D., traveling papers, and a fistful of credit tokens into the boy's hands, then handed over the information he was to carry. His hands closed around Petta's for a brief moment, a wordless wish communicating blessing and reassurance. "The Force will be with you," he said as he sent the young Jedi on his way. He hoped Petta could get offplanet on one of the night shuttle runs before the Emperor made any move against them. There had been no official action taken against the Jedi yet, and a single student, traveling openly on a commercial flight, ought to be the least suspicious courier he could use.

When he was sure Petta was safely on his way, Kenobi went through the school waking a student here, a student there. They gathered in a corner of the lounge, the fourteen of them huddling together in the big empty room, dressed in hastily thrown-on clothes, many with bare feet and barely-combed hair. But their faces were alert and their mouths grimly set, and they were all business. Kenobi stepped up to face them.

"Gentlebeings," he said, "Darth Vader has betrayed us to the Emperor." A spasm of pain crossed his face. Until then it had hardly seemed real. Now, in cold, definite words, admitted before them all, it came home to him completely. He swallowed and repeated, "Darth Vader has betrayed us to the Emperor. You are all Alliance. You know what this means. Now that he has specific information, the Emperor will move against us, and you, in particular, are in danger here. He may or may not include the non-Jedi

candidates and the novices--in any case, we must have a cover for you; they will stay. You all know what to do. Take as much with you as you can; you probably won't be coming back. Leave at once and regroup on Dantooine as soon as you can without attracting attention. We'll look for you there within the month." His mouth thinned and his expression hardened even more. "As of now you are outlaws and every loyal citizen's hand is against you. Trust no one. Take care, and the Force be with you all."

As he turned to go, one of the students spoke. "Master Kenobi, are you coming with us?"

"No."

"But surely you are in more danger than any of us!"

Kenobi answered bleakly, "I am responsible for Darth Vader's presence here. I trusted him. It is my responsibility to rectify that error." Yes, thought Kenobi, I know Darth. When he finds out I have guided him, he will be angry--very angry. His first thought will be revenge. He will come to find me before he does anything else, and I don't think even the Emperor will be able to prevent that. If I can stop him BEFORE he tells the Emperor what he knows, we may yet be able to salvage something from this disaster.



Catryn awoke in the predawn with an uneasy feeling. She was never a heavy sleeper, and ordinarily she would wake several times during the night, turn over, and go back to sleep. But this time there was something wrong. She sat up, extending her Force-perception, listening. There was definitely some disturbance in the room next to hers, an agitation in the Force, and she could hear muffled sounds: scraping, the slam of drawers being shoved hastily back into place, footsteps. Curious, Catryn swung her feet over the edge of the bed, rose, and shrugged on her robe. She pulled her heavy braid of hair out of her collar and dropped it with a thump against her back. The corners of her mouth curved up the tiniest bit; it did make it a bit easier when Darth wasn't here. He insisted on having her hair down, and it was always a mass of tangles in the morning. But tonight he was at the reception at the Imperial palace. That would be interesting to hear about tomorrow, if they could get away together.

She slicked back the few straggling tendrils of hair from around her face with her palms and padded out of her room. The door next to hers was open, ajar, and she could hear movement inside. She knocked and without waiting for an answer, pushed it open further. "Anji? What are you doing up at this hour? Is anything the matter?"

The sharp-faced woman looked up from her packing, hands poised over her traveling-case. When she saw who it was, her face twisted angrily, and Catryn took a surprised step backwards. Anji had never been one of her friends. She was an intensely committed Jedi, outspoken against the Empire, and contemptuous of anyone as self-centered and apolitical as Catryn. But she had always been polite, willing enough to be civil to a fellow student, misguided as she saw her. Now her expression was naked hatred.

Taken aback, Catryn repeated, "What's the matter, Anji?"

The woman's face worked; she seemed torn between prudent silence and a fierce desire to strike out hurtfully at the other. Anger winning, she spat out, "Your damned Sith has sold us all out to the Emperor!"

Catryn's mind caught on the adjective. "My Sith? You mean Darth? What's he done?"

"Gone over to the Force-cursed Emperor, that's what! Master Kenobi told us." With a nasty smile that never reached her eyes, she added, "Oh, don't worry. You'll be safe enough, but I'm getting out of here. Right now." She slammed the lid shut on her traveling-case and headed for the door.

"But what's he done?" Catryn cried after her in confusion.

"Ask Master Kenobi." Anji turned in the doorway. "He's staying here to take care of the mess Vader's created." She hurried out and off down the corridor, shoulders squared like a soldier going into battle.

Catryn stood looking after the woman, her mind furiously turning over this strange exchange. The basic outline was clear enough: Darth had succeeded in catching the Emperor's eye at the reception, as she had suspected he would; and Kenobi, as she had expected, had refused to let Darth go. And now Kenobi was going to "take care" of Darth--that sounded ominous. Kenobi was a sometime general of the armies of Alderaan, Jedi master, master of arms technique. Darth, with his damned Dark Lord's arrogance, would surely try to take out Kenobi by himself, if Darth felt his honor required it, if Obi-Wan went after him. If, Catryn thought to herself miserably, if Darth were ANGRY enough; when he was really angry, Darth had no more sense than-- Catryn cursed savagely under her breath in desperation. Darth was good, very good; but not that good. Kenobi would kill him. She was convinced of it.

Catryn returned to her own room and stood thinking. Her eye fell on the polished wooden box on her shelf. She stepped over to it, took it down, and set it on the desk. Don't get involved; it's not your fight, a rational part of her mind insisted.

Images of Kenobi teaching saber flashed through her mind; he was brilliant. She had not the slightest chance against him in any sort of a set match. Resentment of Kenobi washed over her: Kenobi who had tried to block her entry into the Jedi school, who treated a merchant's daughter who did not want to be a Jedi as less than dirt, who had tried to force her stubborn Corellian independence into his own constricting mold. It was Kenobi who had tried to stand between her and her ship; who now stood between her and the safety of her--

Her what?

Catryn stood with her hands on the warm, smooth wood of the knife-box and thought back. She remembered Darth the first time he had held her double-knives in his hands, here in her room--remembered his beauty and his passion, his glorious pride, the unconquerable fighting spirit in him that

was kin to her own and called to hers so strongly. Remembered, afterward, the fierce joy of their joining in mind and body. Ah, god! she cried silently. Darth! She was swept by a desperate fear and longing for him. What was Darth to her? Her friend, her lover, her . . . She shied away from that final commitment.

No.

She opened the wooden box and picked up her pair of double-knives, and weighed them in her hand. What was Darth to her? She would not ask herself that; it didn't matter. She was a Corellian and a spacer's daughter; she would collect on the debt Kenobi owed her, and pay the one she owed to Darth. Catryn dressed in her fighting clothes, shielded her mind as best she could, and waited.

Before the iron grey of predawn had quite strengthened to morning light, Catryn caught the edge of Vader's aura as he entered the school. There was something subtly different in it, but it was Darth, without question, and she could feel the anger in him. Catryn crept down the stairs and along the corridor toward the aura, projecting invisibility as strongly as she could. She came to the corner and looked around the angle of the wall into the little flagstoned courtyard in front of the door.

The other students had prudently withdrawn, and the area was deserted except for four figures. Kenobi stood there, saber lit and in guard, facing the Dark Lord. Vader's short cloak fluttered in the light morning breeze, the only visible movement as he too stood poised in fighting stance, saber raised in formal salute before him. Vader's two guardsmen stood ready to support their lord; as Catryn arrived she heard Vader address them over his shoulder without turning his head: "This is a matter of honor between us; stay back." They remained tensely waiting, hands on blaster hilts.

Then the tableau broke, and Vader advanced on Kenobi. Under any other circumstances, Catryn would have delighted in the duel. Whatever had happened to him at the palace, Catryn saw, had strengthened even Vader's tremendous ability in the Force, and, spurred on by the raging fury she could feel in him still, Vader moved with such graceful power that Catryn was entranced, frozen motionless with awe. Kenobi traded Vader stroke for stroke, the two flowing from figure to figure with such evenly matched skill that the whole seemed effortless, the deadly battle transformed into a ballet, an exercise in abstract art.

Suddenly Vader gave a sharp, unorthodox twist of his wrists and Kenobi's saber flew out of his hands, clattering across the flagstones. Vader drew back for the killing stroke, but before he could bring it down, Kenobi raised his hands and threw out an arm in a gesture of attack.

Catryn recognized it even before the blow hit: a full-strength Force-strike, a last, desperate, all-out assault with the whole of Kenobi's psychic energy behind it. If it failed, he would be too weakened to strike again; if it succeeded, there was no means of softening its power. It was meant for death.

Vader fell. He crumpled to the ground in one awkward motion, like a puppet whose strings have been suddenly cut, and lay still. His saber swung down as he fell, catching the folds of his cape and starting a smouldering fire in the cloth before his nerveless fingers released the grip and the saber went out.

As the Dark Lord fell, four figures moved into instant action. In one moment, it seemed to Catryn, Kenobi reached out his hand and called his saber to him, swinging it up, lit, as the two Sith guardsmen leaped toward him. Catryn could feel their shock and fear, their suicidal determination to save their lord at any cost, but it was useless. Kenobi deflected their blasterfire effortlessly with the Force, and before the armsman in front could reach him with the dagger he was drawing, Kenobi's lightsaber moved in two smooth arcs, and both guardsmen were on the ground. Catryn was checked for a split second as the first guardsman fell and died, and Catryn felt his final despairing mental cry of love for his lord and the desolation of his absolute loss. Kenobi raised his saber again to bring it down across the still figure of the Dark Lord at his feet, final insurance that he was actually dead, but before the stroke could fall, Catryn's thrown knife blade had buried itself in Kenobi's forearm.

Kenobi whirled, transferring his saber to the other hand as he turned. He had been so absorbed in Vader that he had not even detected Catryn's presence. She stood, balancing the other knife ready to throw. Her Force shield extended around her like a pulsing field of northern lights, visible to Kenobi in the Force, electric with the power of her emotion.

Kenobi had no fear of a half-trained non-Jedi. Even through the pain of his wound, he moved almost negligently to disarm Catryn and bind her in a Force-paralysis until he had finished his business with Vader. Catryn knew she had no hope of preventing him and she had no slightest doubt that he intended to kill her.

"Darth!" she screamed in an absolute extremity of fear.

Probably nothing else could have reached him, called him back from the dark unconsciousness and death he was sinking toward. The force of her terror, aimed directly at him, roused him just enough to prevent his death. He was not even conscious of her as a person; he responded, not to her appeal, but to the raw wave of horror sweeping over him, galvanizing him to one last immense defensive effort. He reached out with his last strength in the Force and held Kenobi.

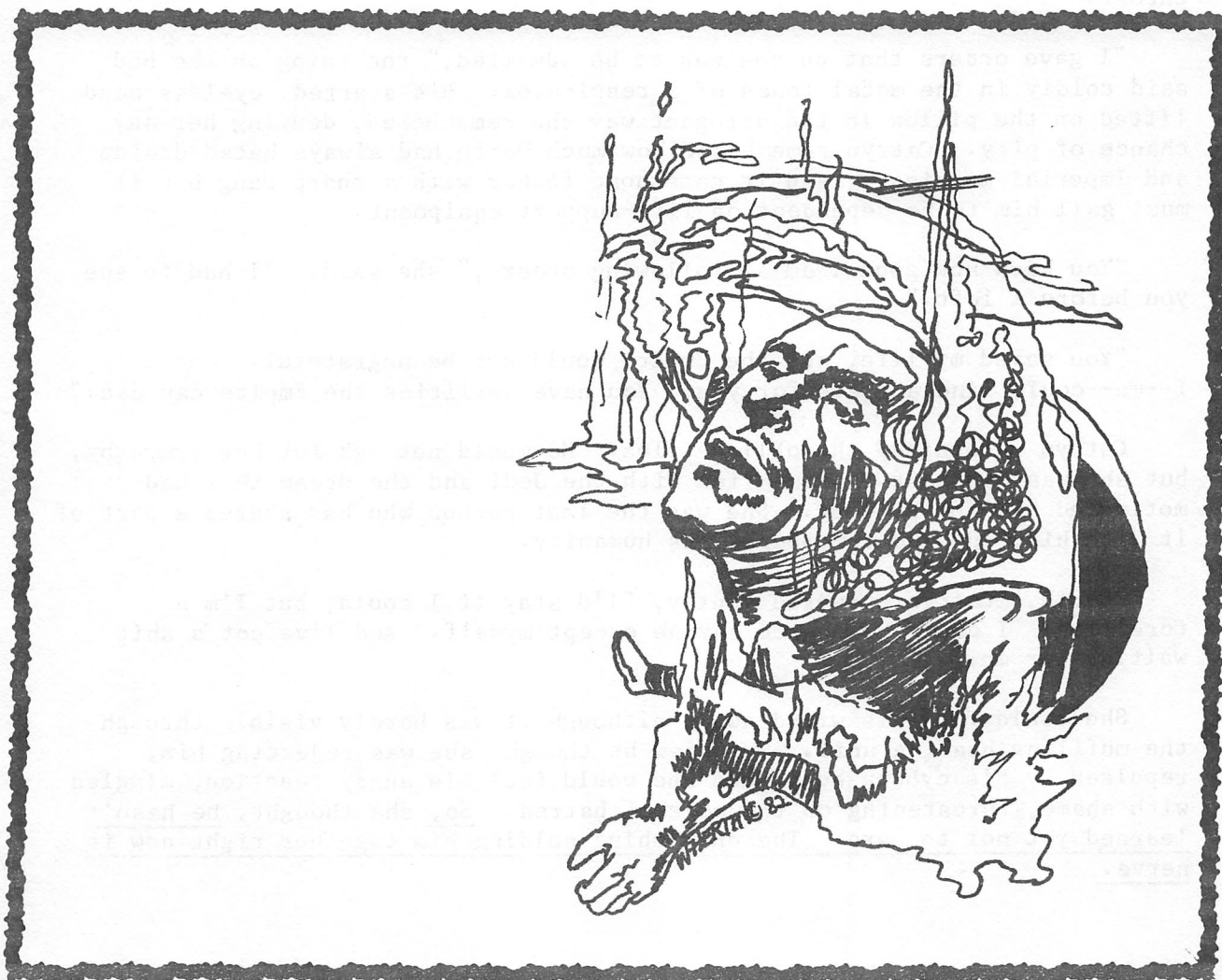
At that moment, when the three of them stood poised in a fragile tricorned balance of power, the whine of an approaching aircar reached them. Kenobi stopped, listening with the Force and his physical senses. As it grew nearer, even Catryn could identify it: troopers. At least a squad of them, and apparently headed directly for the gates of Ruwenjorin. Within seconds they were in sight.

Catryn never knew what motivated him: perhaps the Alliance/Jedi need of him, perhaps his military training that demanded he refuse to accept defeat

without an effort to escape; but Kenobi turned and fled. Before the troopers leaping from the aircar could react, he was gone through the door, disappearing into the dark maze of the Old Quarter's shadowed streets, where the early light had not yet reached the bottom of the artificial canyons. Where he vanished, the Emperor's men never discovered, but the Old Quarter was full of twisting streets, hidden places, and discontented friends of Jedi and Alliance.

Catryn did not care. With a cry, she ran toward the body of her lover, still lying on the ground and moving with the very slightest, uncoordinated, blind squirmings, like some small animal stepped on and crushed but not yet quite dead. Vader's head and shoulders were enveloped in his cloak and--Catryn's horror increased--the cloak was on fire, the smoulder set by his falling lightsaber blade growing quickly into a sheet of flame. The sickening smell of burning flesh reached her.

Without taking time to think, Catryn snatched off her tunic and began beating at the flames with it. Sobbing hysterically with relief, fear, and reaction mixed together, she struck at it again and again, heedless of anything around her, until the hiss of a foam-thrower penetrated her



attention and the fire was covered by a layer of smothering material. A pair of hands reached out and dragged her away as a medic knelt by Vader's side, pulling the charred cloak away, applying lifesaving equipment with calm, efficient speed.

Catryn stood, shaking, clutching the remains of her tunic in her hand, as the Imperial medical unit transferred Vader to the med unit aircar and carried him away.



It was nearly a month after the saber duel before Catryn was allowed to visit Vader. She walked into his hospital room, slid the door shut behind her, and took in the injured figure in the healing unit. In spite of speed-heal and bacta, the Force-induced wounds had not responded well, and Vader was still on total life-support, his torso concealed by the boxy mechanism, his arms and hands muffled in protective material. She remembered the fire, the Force-blast, Vader's crumpled body on the ground, but the sight of him here, the full impact of his hurts, was too much for her. "My god," Catryn breathed through the sour taste of nausea in her throat.

"I gave orders that no one was to be admitted," the thing on the bed said coldly in the metal tones of a respirator. His scarred, eyeless head lifted on the pillow in the arrogant way she remembered, denying her any chance of pity. Catryn remembered how much Darth had always hated droids and Imperial machinery, and it came home to her with a sharp pang how it must gall him to be dependent on life-support equipment.

"You know how good I am at following orders," she said. "I had to see you before I left."

"You saved my life, and the Empire would not be ungrateful. I--we--could find a place for you. You have abilities the Empire can use."

Catryn recognized the oblique plea. He would not ask for her sympathy, but she was his last tenuous link with the Jedi and the dream that had motivated him for so long. She was the last person who had shared a part of it with him, and who remembered his humanity.

"Darth," Catryn answered gently, "I'd stay if I could, but I'm a Corellian. I don't belong to anyone except myself. And I've got a ship waiting for me."

She could feel his withdrawal, although it was hardly visible through the muffling healing unit. She knew he thought she was rejecting him, repulsed by his cyborg body, and she could feel his angry reaction, mingled with shame, threatening on the edge of hatred. So, she thought, he hasn't learned yet not to care. The only thing holding him together right now is nerve.

She felt a flood of compassion. She was too much of a realist, she told herself desperately, to call it anything else. I won't--I can't--BELONG to anyone, she repeated silently, and love means possession.

Then why did you stay to save him from Kenobi? a small traitor thought whispered. Because . . . because . . . She thrust it violently away. Because I hated Kenobi; because Darth and I, we were, we are, two of a kind. Independent. For ourselves. Strong enough to be free. Catryn studied the thing on the bed, captive of the healing machinery she knew Vader hated. He was still stronger than she, to endure that. He would never be free again. Such courage, she thought.

Coward! she giped at herself. Quickly, before she could lose her nerve, she covered the few steps to the side of the bed, leaned down, closed her eyes, and kissed him on his broken mouth.

With her eyes closed, she could feel his aura strongly in the Force. There was a new, bleak distance in it, and the weary, hollow memory of great pain recently past, the sense of pain and disorientation which still remained. Underneath, Catryn touched his stubborn gallantry and his bitter pride. He'll make it, she thought wryly; he doesn't have enough sense to give up!

She felt his faint answering warmth, and knew Vader recognized that she accepted him and paid her tribute to his indomitable spirit. And Catryn saw, beneath all Vader's suffering, beneath the machinery and the newly alien, metallic tang of his aura, Vader's enduring selfhood, and his undamaged maleness. The seductive pull of his masculinity remained, as strong as ever.

Shaken, she pulled back. The taste of serum was still on her mouth and she absently licked her lips, ignoring it, accepting it. Vader looked back at her without eyes, remote, his pride satisfied, his identity distanced now from any emotion, either appeal or anger. She saw the figure on the bed no longer with her eyes, but with her mind, her Force-sense. She knew she wanted him still and would always want him in some way; but she wanted her ship more. She had made her choice, and the ship was her survival. He would not deign to compete, and she felt in him that still coldness at the center of his being that made her, made everyone, ultimately no more than an extension of himself. He had dismissed her. She had been in control when she entered; now she stood uncertain, half sorry to have taken from her what she had come to give up. She felt almost a little guilty, as if she had completed the severing of the last link between Darth Vader and the outer sunlight.

"Darth, my dear--my very dear--goodbye," she said softly. He did not answer. She went to the door, paused with her hand over the control, and the guilt turned somehow to anger. If he hadn't lost the Jedi, she thought; if I weren't the last one-- Spirit sparked in her and she closed her mind firmly to further thought. It's not my fault; it's not my responsibility.

"When you run into Kenobi again--" she said, and her hatred was heavy in her aura. She left the thought unfinished, palmed the lock, and fled.

Vader lay for a while, then he reached out in the Force toward the night sky, turning his mind outward to where the stars blazed coldly against the dark, and contemplated the idea of destiny.

Epilogue

"Thank you, General Kenobi. It was kind of you to come all the way to the Sith to tell me yourself. You could have sent a message."

Darth is dead. Jessha's thoughts scurried round and round like a small prey-creature cornered by a hunting-cat. Darth was dead and the small, the precarious, security she had gained from the threat he represented to Koric was also gone. Koric's first move, now that he knew that Darth was dead . . .

No, Koric DIDN'T know, she realized; not yet. Kenobi would have come to her first, as Darth's wife, in the manner of the Empire, not to the lord of the House as Sith propriety demanded. Koric would not know yet, and she had thereby that much of an advantage, that much time.

My son, she thought. I must get my son away from Koric to safety. Not herself. She could cover the child's tracks for a time, long enough, she hoped. She had little to fear for herself. The former wife of a deposed--deposed and dead--Dark Lord, a woman of Koric's own blood and a woman known to have been disloyal to her lord, was a woman utterly without a party of her own. No Sith lord, no matter how discontented, would follow her now, and not even Koric could see her as a threat, surely.

But her son was something else. Now that Darth was dead, his Heir was the only being standing between Koric and a completely legitimate claim to lordship of Sith, as Darth's nearest living male relative. The boy was no longer any use as a hostage; he was a prime target.

Jessha felt a dull pain stir in her. She would never have thought, once, that she would have to defend a four-year-old boy, and her own son, from her brother. But Koric had changed; she could not avoid recognizing it. More and more since he had declared himself Dark Lord, he had retreated from her and from everyone into himself, trusting no one and seeing threats to himself everywhere. The slightest hint of disaffection among lords or the people brought harsh reprisals: scourgings, impalings, the burning of

whole villages for the commons; the ax and the block for nobility, attainder and expropriation of estates. Even the little Alderaani that Koric had seemed so fond of, Pera'u, had been accused of treason and executed not a tenth-year earlier, for repeatedly requesting leave to return to his home planet against Koric's wishes. No, Koric had ceased entirely to behave as a reasonable Dark Lord should. He was driving the people of Sith into the very revolt he feared.

Darth's Heir would be the perfect figurehead for that revolt. Even Koric, and even Koric in this new, fey mood of self-destruction, could see that. So Darth's Heir must be eliminated.

I must get my son away to safety, Jessha thought again. Where could she send the boy, and whom could she send him with? Nowhere in Sith was safe, and any of her people were suspect.

Kenobi cleared his throat, and Jessha's attention returned to him with a start. The general was watching her closely, and Jessha wondered how much of her thoughts he had been able to follow in the Force through his Jedi methods--or how much he had guessed. Did he know Darth had a son? Did he understand the political situation in Sith? The Jedi were far from inexperienced in the intricacies of power, and General Kenobi, Jessha was well aware, was no fool.

He was also a Jedi master, a general of the armies of Alderaan, a figure of power in the Empire--and completely outside Koric's authority. Perhaps, Jessha thought with a stirring of incredulous, unexpected hope, perhaps the solution was standing right in front of her.

But how far could she trust Kenobi?

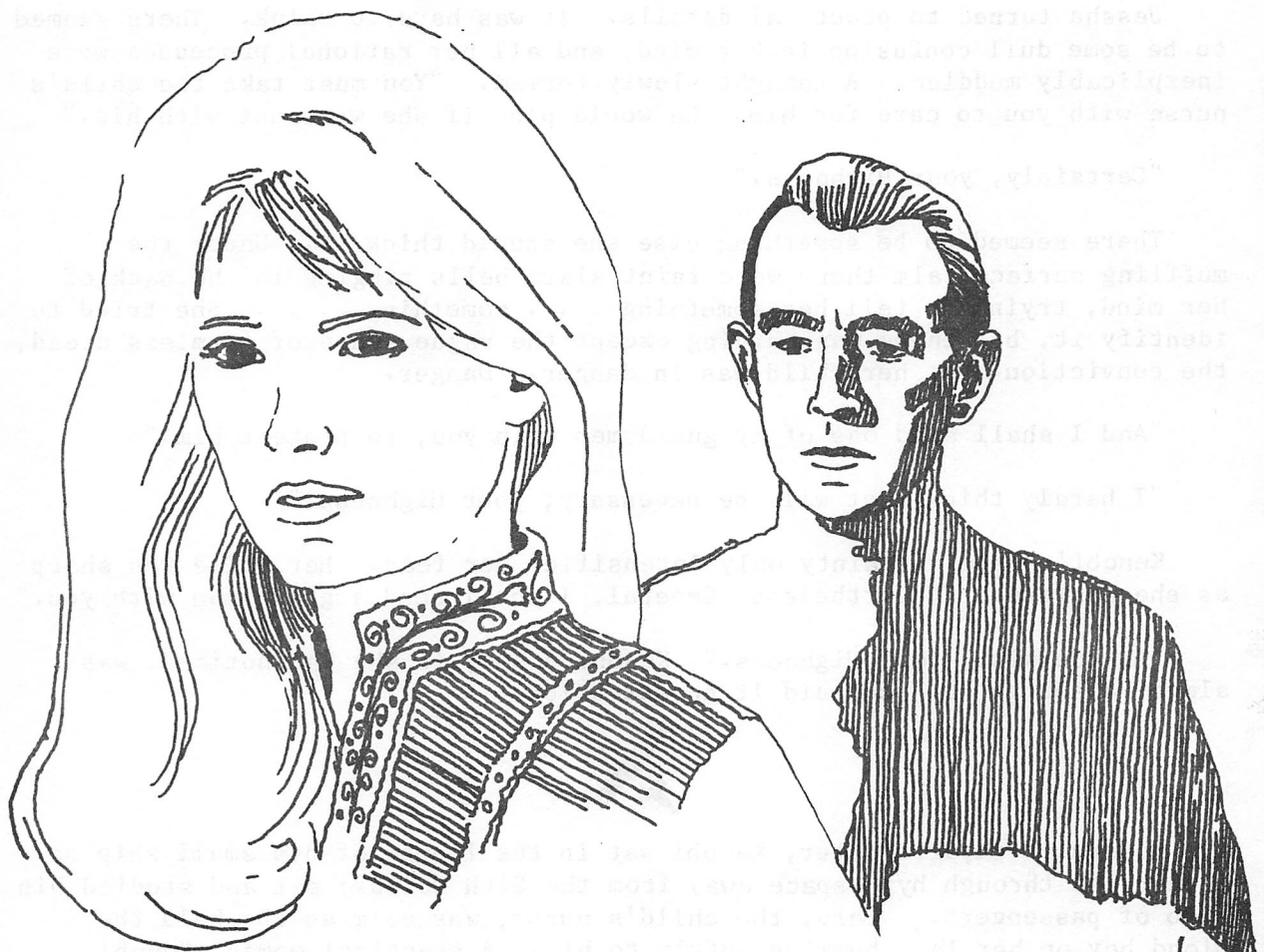
The unease she had always experienced in Kenobi's presence came back to her, along with her awareness of the nerve-rasping alienness of the Jedi Force-signature. Then, even as she concentrated on it, Jessha felt the out-of-phase Force resonance fade and slip away from her. Uncertainly, she tried to recapture it. It eluded her, and as it vanished, a wave of blind panic swept over Jessha. Jessha heard Kenobi addressing her without understanding the words, the tones soft, soothing, faultlessly polite . . . terrifying. Terrifying . . . Jessha blinked and caught her breath.

Why terrifying? Surely there was nothing to fear from this harmless, kindly man. He stood patiently in front of her, a dignified smile of helpful, almost fatherly, sympathy on his face. Distrust Kenobi? No, of course, no one could distrust Kenobi.

And it did not seem strange to her at all when Kenobi said, "You are concerned for your son's safety, your Highness. I can help you. Let me take him away with me to safety."

"Yes, of course," Jessha murmured.

"And--" Kenobi prompted. Jessha understood at once what he wanted her to say.



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"And you must not tell me where you are taking him, General Kenobi. You must tell no one at all, for the sake of the child's safety. What we do not know, we cannot tell, under any means of . . . persuasion."

"Even so, your Highness," Kenobi said, with a bow. "Your Highness is most wise. I am at your Highness's command."

Jessha turned to practical details. It was hard to think. There seemed to be some dull confusion in her mind, and all her rational processes were inexplicably muddled. A thought slowly formed. "You must take the child's nurse with you to care for him. He would pine if she were not with him."

"Certainly, your Highness."

There seemed to be something else she should think of. Under the muffling surface calm there were faint alarm bells ringing in the back of her mind, trying to tell her something . . . something. . . . She tried to identify it, but there was nothing except the vague sense of formless dread, the conviction that her child was in danger. Danger.

"And I shall send one of my guardsmen with you, to protect him."

"I hardly think that will be necessary, your Highness."

Kenobi's calm certainty only intensified her fear. Her voice was sharp as she answered, "Nevertheless, General, I shall send a guardsman with you."

"As you wish, your Highness." Kenobi's bow, if she had noticed, was almost a shrug, but she paid it no attention.



Several timeparts later, Kenobi sat in the lounge of his small ship as it hurtled through hyperspace away from the Sith Worlds; sat and studied his trio of passengers. Beru, the child's nurse, was calm as she held the blond boy on her lap, humming softly to him. A practical woman, Kenobi decided, and not overly imaginative. She would confine herself to caring for the child and would no doubt make him a good mother. The superfluous guardsman (what was his name? Ah, yes--Owen) looked less cooperative. A surly type, suspicious, and probably full of Sith prejudices against the Jedi. Kenobi noted the man's furtive glances in Kenobi's direction, half fearful and half hostile. No, Kenobi thought with mild amusement, this Owen did not look at all amiable. It would be best to have as little to do with him as possible. Where they were going, he would provide Kenobi with a perfect cover for anyone trying to connect the child with the Jedi. Yes, he would keep Owen after all. . . .

Kenobi turned to the little boy, Luke, blinking sleepily against Beru's shoulder. Darth's son, and not much younger than Darth had been when Kenobi first met him. The boy's resemblance to his father was unmistakable. Kenobi could feel the echo of Darth's overwhelming strength in the Force, joined with that of the Princess his mother, in the child. Luke might yet prove to be even stronger in the Force than his father, given proper

training. And this time, Kenobi thought, there would be no other loyalties to subvert his purpose for the boy, no ties to Sith, no ties to his father, no ties at all except those Kenobi would choose for him, and they would be ones easily broken when the time came for Kenobi to claim the boy as his own. This time, Luke, Kenobi silently promised the child, you will be all mine, and when the moment is ripe, you will be the means to fulfill my purpose: the destruction of the emperor, the revenge of the Jedi.

The boy Luke was hardly more than a baby, but the potential was there, beyond any doubt. All he had to do was wait. And Obi-Wan Kenobi was good at waiting.

He would wait on Tatooine.

Nothing Left To Lose

Corellians never linger,
So guard your loving heart;
For when their ships break hangar
Corellian loves depart.

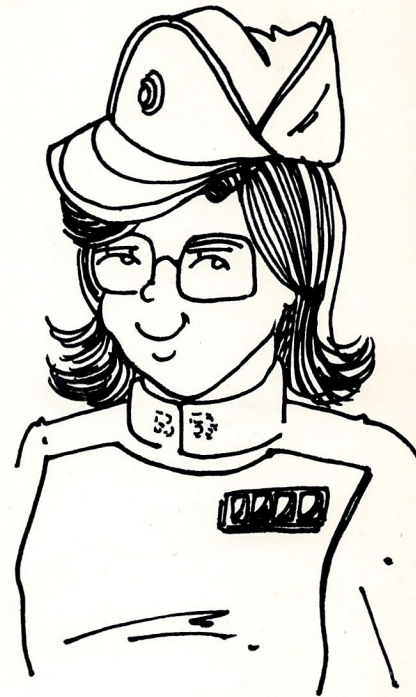
He'll tell you where he's been, babe,
And where he's going next.
She'll tell you, you were great, babe,
But space is better yet.

For they are kin to the starshine
That lights up their way.
They'll glitter by nighttime,
But they'll be gone by day.

Corellians give their friendship
To those they can respect.
But friendship and its freedoms
Are all you can expect.

And when your love has gone, babe,
Don't give up any tears.
Corellian love ain't constant
But it lasts through all the years.

Maggie Nowakowska



Karen Osman, loyal supporter of the Empire, having recently escaped the attack of a Rebel hitllama in the Imperial Outlands of Al-Bekerkee, is currently living in the smog-filled environs of LA. With the aid and support of her loyal House Cats, Osman is currently active in the campaign for Clone Rights, and is reputedly working on a biography of one of Lord Vader's Clone Officers. She is also reported to be a member of the Empaths' Support League.



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